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Allegiances

[image]

Key
[T] Previously ThunderClan
[S] Previously ShadowClan
[R] Previously RiverClan
[W] Previously WindClan

TigerClan
Leader-Tigerstar: large, dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes and unusually sharp claws [T]
Deputy-Brambleclaw: dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes [T]
Advisors-
-Whitestorm: big white tom [T]
-Blackfoot: white tom with black paws [S]
-Leopardfur: unusually golden spotted she-cat [R]
-Mudclaw: mottled dark brown tom [W]
Healers-
-Barkface: short-tailed brown tom [W]
-Mudfur: long-haired light brown tabby tom [R]
-Cinderpelt: dark gray she-cat (mother to Jaggedtooth's kit: Smokekit) [T]
-Runningnose: small gray and white tom [S]
-Mapleheart: ginger and white she-cat [T]
Warriors-
-Oakfur: small brown tom [S]
-Goldenflower: pale ginger she-cat [T]
-Webfoot: dark gray tabby tom [W]
-Tawnyfur: golden brown she-cat [W]
-Tornear: tabby tom [W]
-Tallpoppy: long-legged, light brown tabby she-cat [S]
-Fawnstep: ginger she-cat with white flecks [S]
-Mistyfoot: dark gray she-cat [R]
-Longtail: pale tabby tom with dark stripes [T]
-Mosspelt: tortoiseshell she-cat [R]
-Breezetail: cream-colored she-cat with blue eyes [W]

-Jaggedtooth: huge tabby tom [S]
-Dawncloud: small tabby she-cat [S]
-Runningwind: swift tabby tom [T]
-Mousefur: small dusky brown she-cat [T]
-Littlecloud: very small tabby tom [S]
-Russetfur: dark ginger she-cat [S]
-Onewhisker: light brown tabby tom [W]
-Runningbrook: light gray she-cat [W]
-Darkflower: black she-cat [S]
-Whitethroat: black tom with white chest and paws [S]
-Brindleface: pretty tabby she-cat [T]
-Brackenfur: golden-brown tabby tom [T]
-Whitetail: small white she-cat [W]
-Sandstorm: pale ginger she-cat with green eyes [T]
-Dustpelt: dark brown tabby tom [T]
-Petalnose: tortoiseshell she-cat [S]
-Gorsefur: long-legged brown tabby tom [W]
-Swiftwind: black and white tom [T]
-Brightflower: white she-cat with ginger patches [T]
-Briarnose: long-haired tortoiseshell she-cat [R]
-Thornclaw: golden-brown tabby tom [T]
-Ashfang: pale gray tom with darker flecks and dark blue eyes [T]
-Rainwhisker: black tom [T]
-Sorreltail: tortoiseshell and white she-cat [T]
-Rowanclaw: ginger tabby tom [S]
-Tawnypelt: tortoiseshell she-cat [T]
-Owlgaze: light brown tabby tom with green eyes [T]
-Hopeflame: long-haired russet she-cat with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes (expecting Brambleclaw's kits) [T]
-Free: long-haired gray tom with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes, former loner
-Crowfeather: black tom with blue eyes [W]
-Skybreeze: blue-grey she-cat with blue eyes [W]
-Cloudpool: white tom [W]
-Ravenflight: black tom [S]
-Cloverpetal: black and white she-cat with green eyes [S]
-Hollytail: light gray and white tabby she-cat [S]
-Eagleswoop dark brown tabby tom with a white-tipped tail & white face [W]
-Soarwing: black and white she-cat with blue eyes [W]

Apprentices-
-Hailpaw blue-grey tom with amber eyes (mentor: Ashfang) [R]
-Dewpaw: dark gray she-cat with white flecks and amber eyes (mentor: Thornclaw) [R]
-Turtlepaw: brown tom with golden-swirled stripes (mentor: Mousefur) [R]
-Shimmerpaw: pale gray she-cat with green eyes (mentor: Mosspelt) [R]
-Ebonypaw: pure black tom (mentor: Hopeflame)
-Smallpaw: very small tabby she-kit with white paws (mentor: Sorreltail)
-Pinepaw: russet tabby tom (mentor: Brambleclaw)
-Heatherpaw: dusky brown she-cat (mentor: Tawnypelt) [W]
-Larkpaw: light brown tabby she-cat (mentor: Cloudpool) [W]
-Lilacpaw: gray she-cat with brown points (mentor: Russetfur) [W]
-Gingerpaw: ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes (mentor: Sandstorm)
-Beepaw: pale ginger tom with black stripes (mentor: Jaggedtooth)
-Spottedpaw: tortoiseshell she-cat (mentor: Mapleheart)
-Leafpaw: black and white tom (mentor: Ashfang)
-Smokepaw: smoky black tabby tom (mentor: Thornclaw)
Queens-
-Ferncloud: pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and pale green eyes (mother to Dustpelt's kits: Spiderkit and Shrewkit) [T]
-Featherstream: long-haired silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes (expecting Owlgaze's kits) [R]
Kits-
-Spiderkit: lithe black tom with brown underbelly (mother: Ferncloud)
-Shrewkit: small dark brown tom with amber eyes (mother: Ferncloud)

Cats Outside the Clans
-Barley: black and white tom
-Butterfly: golden tabby she-cat
-Rosie: tortoiseshell and white she-cat
-Sunny: golden tabby tom
-Oliver: pale gray tabby tom
-Maisie: black she-cat with white paws (mother to Oliver's kits: Luna, Hawk, Shadow, and Lion)

-Luna: silver tabby she-kit
-Hawk: brown tabby tom
-Shadow: black tom with white chest
-Lion: golden tabby tom

Prologue

[image]

Darkness fell over the forest, but it allowed for the stars and moon to share their light. The forest was bathed in silver which gave it an ethereal feeling. A gentle wind weaved through the branches. Among the shadows beneath the canopy, tensions were rising.

A flame-colored tom raced through the undergrowth, dodging trees and bramble thickets. His green eyes were focused on everything ahead of him. Movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. He was soon joined by a long-haired gray tom. The two stopped momentarily to greet each other in a way only old friends could.

"Fireheart, I've missed you," the gray tom murmured.

"I missed you too, Graystripe," the flame-colored tom replied warmly. "We have to hurry or Bluestar will have our pelts."

Together, they took off again through the forest, heading for the grassy clearing at the center of StarClan. They slowed down when the clearing came into view. At the center of the clearing was the MoonOak, a gigantic oak larger than Fourtrees. Waiting in the clearing were other StarClan cats.

Fireheart and Graystripe hurried down to meet them. Among them were Bluestar, Crookedstar, Tallstar, Raggedstar, and numerous warriors and medicine cats. They all had fear in their eyes, deep dark fear. It's been generations since there's been a fear like this one.

"Welcome all," Bluestar meowed. "We have much to discuss."

"Why have we waited until now to discuss the clear problem?" Raggedstar growled. "Tigerstar's gone mad!"

"He has control of everything," Tallstar added with equal fear. "I'm

worried for my clan..."

"*Your* clan?!" Crookedstar snarled. "You're not the one that had a TigerClan spy among your clan for many moons!"

"She infiltrated WindClan too!" Tallstar argued.

"But by then the damage was already done, RiverClan had a chance and she took it away." Crookedstar glared at Graystripe. "This is all your daughter's fault."

Graystripe's hair stood on end. "Hopeflame was scared. She was just obeying orders!"

"Without her, RiverClan and WindClan could've saved themselves!" Crookedstar bared his fangs angrily.

Bluestar spoke up suddenly, "Quiet!" Her blue eyes were alight with fire. "This is nobody's fault but Tigerstar's! Hopeflame just found herself a pawn in his game." Graystripe lowered his head sadly. Fireheart moved closer to comfort his friend. "We must move forward, there's still a chance we can save the clans."

Yellowfang narrowed her eyes at Bluestar. "You're not actually considering that, are you? There's too much risk involved!"

Tallstar glanced at Bluestar in confusion. "What is she talking about?"

Bluestar averted her gaze and Yellowfang sighed. She turned back to the rest of the cats with worry. "Hopeflame is our last chance."

"You mean to tell me that the one cat who can save the clans is the one who brought their downfall?" Crookedstar growled.

"Unfortunately."

Chapter 1

[image]

Outside the den, Hopeflame could hear the clan beginning to wake. She fluffed out her pelt against the cold and snuggled closer to Brambleclaw. He felt so warm compared to the frigid cold creeping into their den. Hopeflame locked her green eyes on his face as he slept.

She couldn't get over the fact that they were having kits together. It felt like only a few moons ago that they were kits tumbling around in the dirt dreaming about the life of a warrior. Now they were warriors on the verge of parenthood.

Brambleclaw suddenly opened his sun-filled eyes. "Good morning sleepyhead," Hopeflame purred bemusedly. She licked his cheek with fondness.

He smiled at her warmly then returned the gesture. Brambleclaw lowered his head to rest it gently on her slightly swollen abdomen. "Good morning kits, father loves you."

Together, they rose from their nests and emerged into the camp clearing. Hopeflame glanced towards the apprentice den to see that Ebonypaw was waiting for her. He hadn't forgotten that they were heading out with the dawn patrol.

Ever since Hopeflame learned she was pregnant, Brambleclaw had been pressuring her to join the other queens in the nursery. But Hopeflame wasn't ready yet. There was so much more that she wanted to teach Ebonypaw. Owlgaze had already agreed, with Tigerstar's approval, to continue Ebonypaw's training.

Brambleclaw thought that she was just being difficult when, in reality, she was just in denial about being a mother. She wanted kits, yes, but she'd only just received her first apprentice. Sandstorm spoke with her about it one day and said that it was perfectly natural for a first-time mother to be in denial. Hopeflame took that

as an excuse to keep training. She didn't want to join the nursery until she was round and slow.

"Runningwind, you're taking the Wind Border with Dustpelt, Hopeflame, Ebonypaw, Thornclaw, and Dewpaw," Brambleclaw ordered. Then he moved on to set the other dawn patrols as well as the hunting patrols.

Hopeflame trotted over to Runningwind who sat at the entrance to the camp. Ebonypaw followed suit with Dewpaw at his flank. Dustpelt emerged from the warriors den and stretched before making his way over. Thornclaw even beat him over.

"Alright, you heard Brambleclaw." Runningwind stood up, waving his long tail. "Let's move out."

Runningwind led the patrol out of Fourtrees with their paws on the trail towards the moors. Hopeflame settled alongside Ebonypaw towards the center of the patrol. The black apprentice still felt uneasy whenever they went out onto the moors. Hopeflame could understand his nervousness; TigerClan cats weren't used to open skies above their heads. The moors offered no shelter from the elements or enemies.

Hopeflame kept her senses alert as they made their way through the forest. Everything looked so pristine after last night's snow. Icicles hung from the tree branches and snow formed mounds over the underbrush. Most animals were hibernating such as mice, voles, and other small rodents. Luckily, with all territories combined, there was still plenty of fresh-kill to go around. The former RiverClan cats were teaching other cats how to fish, but Hopeflame didn't need to learn that.

Graystripe already taught her.

The thought of her father caused her heart to tighten with grief. It's been a few moons since his death, but it still felt like yesterday. She couldn't think of Graystripe without remembering Stormblaze, her dear half-brother. It was her fault that they were both dead and she would never forgive herself.

A bird overhead disturbed a tree branch holding snow which caused some of it to cascade onto her. Hopeflame jumped and was snapped out of her thoughts. "You okay there, Hopeflame?" Thornclaw asked her teasingly.

Hopeflame's whiskers twitched in amusement at her former mentor. Before Graystripe trained her, Thornclaw did. He had been a patient, level-headed mentor in the face of many challenges.

"Oh, you know, just daydreaming as usual." Hopeflame teased him, trying to cover up her depressing thoughts.

Thornclaw huffed and ran ahead to walk alongside Runningwind. Hopeflame was left behind with Ebonypaw and Dewpaw. The two apprentices were speaking in low voices, occasionally giggling. Seeing them together reminded Hopeflame of being an apprentice. Back then, she had only a crush on Brambleclaw. Oh, how things have changed.

The wind picked up, signaling that they were near the moors. Hopeflame squinted her eyes against the wind. Up ahead, the trees thinned then stopped altogether. The moors stretched out before them to meet the sky. Her heart lifted and she had the sudden urge to run.

Runningwind took off, leaving them to follow. Despite her growing belly, Hopeflame easily kept up with the patrol. She loved the feeling of the wind in her long pelt. It reminded her of her days in WindClan. She suppressed her memories of WindClan and the recent Merge-it has caused more pain than any other.

They reached the crest of a hill which offered them a great view of WindClan'a former territory. To some, it might all look the same underneath the snow. But Hopeflame's limited stay here was enough for her to easily pinpoint the different places. Over there were the rabbit warrens and far over that way was Lookout Rock.

"It's so cold up here," Ebonypaw muttered, fluffing out his pelt. "I don't know why any cat would willingly live here." Hopeflame didn't reprimand him-she couldn't help agreeing.

Runningwind led the charge down the hill towards the far side of the moors. It was hard to believe that he wasn't WindClan-born. He was the perfect specimen of a WindClan cat: long legs and a small frame.

They continued running until Highstones came into view. Hopeflame cast her eyes down the hill towards the mountain of rocks that used to be a sacred place to the clans. Some cats still believed in StarClan, but Hopeflame wasn't sure. She wished for it to be real because that would make it easier to deal with the deaths of everyone she loved. It was nice to think they went to somewhere better.

"What's in Highstones?" Ebonypaw wondered. "Darkflower told me that there's something called the Moonstone."

"I wouldn't know, Ebonypaw." Hopeflame murmured sadly. She's never been within a tree-length of Highstones.

She thought it was about time that she did.

Chapter 2

[image]

When the patrol returned to camp, Hopeflame was tired and hungry. Lately she's been hungrier than usual, and Mapleheart explained that it was because of the kits. Thornclaw disappeared into the warriors den almost immediately. Hopeflame watched Ebonypaw wander back towards the apprentice den with Dewpaw before she headed for the fresh-kill pile. She picked out a particularly fat rabbit and dragged it to the edge of camp.

Hopeflame settled beneath the shadows cast by the four great oaks. So far, the Fourtrees camp has worked well for TigerClan. There seemed to be no shortage of space for the enormous clan. Everyone had their place, but the four great oaks were a constant reminder of the four clans that died so that TigerClan could exist.

Out of the corner of her eye, Hopeflame glimpsed Sandstorm padding over. The she-cat's pale ginger tabby pelt glimmered like sunshine under the sun rays. "Hungry?" Sandstorm stood over her, whiskers twitching in amusement.

Hopeflame's pelt felt hot with embarrassment despite the cold chill. "What, I haven't eaten yet today..."

"I'm only teasing you," Sandstorm purred. She settled down beside her in the sun, tucking her paws neatly under her chest. "So, how are you adjusting?"

"To being pregnant?" Hopeflame wondered out loud. What was she supposed to say? The clan treated her differently, especially Brambleclaw. They acted as if she grew fragile like a twig that could snap at any moment. "I'm doing well, I guess. Brambleclaw is really protective of me. He thinks that I should be in the nursery already."

"All toms handle fatherhood differently." Sandstorm chuckled, then her expression became solemn. She gained a faraway look in her

eyes as if she were peering into a hidden world only she could see. "Graystripe wanted me to leave TigerClan to live with him in RiverClan."

"What?!" Hopeflame gasped in shock. She stared at Sandstorm as the words sunk in. "Really?!" It was strange to consider.

How would her life be different if she had grown up in RiverClan? Probably, Stormblaze and Featherstream would've known her as their sister from the very beginning. Perhaps Sandstorm wouldn't have given Free away. She never would've known Brambleclaw nor been impacted by the clans she infiltrated. Hopeflame would've been a very different cat.

Hopeflame twitched her ears nervously. "Why didn't you go to RiverClan with Graystripe?" She wondered. "Wouldn't it have been easier?"

Sandstorm nodded slowly. "Yes, it would've been easier than keeping the truth from you kits." She hesitated, sitting up as if to prepare herself. "But I felt that I had a duty to my clan. ThunderClan was my home and I still had hoped that Tigerstar could be stopped. If I had left, who would've remained to watch over those who couldn't protect themselves?"

For a moment, Hopeflame contemplated her words. If she had been in Sandstorm's position, would she have left or remained in ThunderClan? She wasn't sure. All Hopeflame knew was that her mother made a choice, and whether it was the right one or not, they couldn't go back in time to change it.

"You did what you thought was best," Hopeflame meowed, meeting her mother's gaze. "Owlgaze, Mapleheart, and I know that."

Distress filled Sandstorm's pale green eyes. "But you could've had a better life," Sandstorm growled. "Free could've grown up alongside you and your littermates." She took a shaky breath. "You could've known Graystripe as your father..."

Hopeflame didn't say a word. Everything that Sandstorm said was true, but what use would it be to worry about the past? The past

couldn't be changed and they needed to focus on the present. That's where they lived, not the past.

"Our lives would've been different, yes," Hopeflame murmured softly, eyes downcast. Then she looked up to meet her mother's gaze. "But this is our life now, and we need to live it. Worrying about the past won't change a thing."

Sandstorm started at her for the longest time before finally speaking. "When did you become so wise? It seems only yesterday you and your littermates were born." She shook her head in disbelief. "You've all grown up so much."

Suddenly, a commotion broke out at the center of camp and, when Hopeflame looked, she saw Cloudpool and Ashfang locked in a clawing mess of fur and blood. Onlookers began shouting and dodging them as they rolled in the dirt. The fur along Hopeflame's spine stood on end and she was on her paws in an instant.

"Pull them apart!" She ordered since no one else seemed to be taking charge. Tigerstar and Brambleclaw were nowhere in sight. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Blackfoot and Leopardfur watching without moving a muscle to stop the fight. "I said pull them apart!" Hopeflame repeated with more urgency. "Don't let them fight!"

Her words prompted Rainwhisker, Tawnypelt, and Owlgaze to leap into the fray. Rainwhisker and Owlgaze managed to pin Cloudpool down while Tawnypelt pushed Ashfang back. Cloudpool had patches of fur missing on his shoulder and Ashfang had blood trailing down his chest.

Hopeflame marched over with her tail lashing in anger. "What was that?!" She demanded with fire in her green eyes.

"Not that it's any of *your* business," Cloudpool spat from his place beneath Rainwhisker and Owlgaze's paws, "That TigerClan rat said I was weak!"

Ashfang's blue eyes flared at the accusation. "He tried to take fresh-kill right from my jaws!"

"Enough!" It was Whitestorm's voice that rang out across the clearing. "No more in-fighting! We're all one clan so we must get along!"

"I'll never call that TigerClan filth my clan mate," Cloudpool snarled, his grey and white pelt bristling with anger. "I'll never call TigerClan mine!"

Murmurs of agreement rose up out of the crowd from the former RiverClan and WindClan cats. Their faces were solemn as they voiced their agreement. A chill ran down Hopeflame's spine at the realization of their reality: they were a clan divided, one that might never become one.

"It's all her fault." Crowfeather hissed, casting a side glance in Hopeflame's direction. "She's the one that brought our downfall."

"Silence!" Tigerstar snarled, appearing out of nowhere to claw Crowfeather across the face. "I won't have any traitors in TigerClan!" He bared his fangs so near Crowfeather's face that the warrior flinched.

The large tabby tom surveyed the rest of the clan, his amber eyes burning with fire. "Anyone else have anything to say?!" Tigerstar leaped up onto the Great Rock, his entire body taunt with tension. "TigerClan is the greatest clan to walk this forest. You should all be *grateful* to be a part of this momentous era."

He snarled, eyes flashing. "I will have no more talk of resistance!" Then he leaped down and marched over to his den. "Blackfoot! Leopardfur!" The two advisors leaped to their paws to follow him.

Hopeflame felt a light touch at her shoulder, making her jump. But when she looked, she found herself looking into Brambleclaw's gaze. He didn't say a word, but she could sense his uneasiness. Brambleclaw gestured for her to follow him to their den on the other side of camp.

"Don't say anything," Brambleclaw warned once they reached the safety of the den. "My father's been on edge since the Merge with WindClan. He fears that not everyone supports him."

"Tigerstar fears something?" Hopeflame mewed sarcastically, resting the top of her tail on his shoulder. "It'll take some time, but the clan will feel united soon."

Brambleclaw visibly relaxed before her at her words. "I can only hope that you're right." He disappeared into their den, but Hopeflame paused.

Hopeflame decided that she's put it off long enough. It was about time that she traveled to Highstones. She needed to know what StarClan had to say, if there even was a StarClan.

~*~

A/N

I would like to thank all my readers for their patience. After my iPad died where I did all my WattPad writing, it's been hard to get back into it. It was never my plan to abandon any of my series.

Chapter 3

[image]

As soon as the sun set over the forest, the clan turned in for the night. The moon rose in the sky, half in light, bathing everything it touched in silver. Hopeflame turned over in her nest bedside Brambleclaw, who slept soundly and snored softly. She studied his face for a moment, noticing each feature that graced his broad face.

What would she tell him if he woke up and realized that she was gone? Where would she say she's been? Would she tell the truth or would she lie? Which would be harder for him to hear? Either way, she had to go and answer the call of StarClan.

Slowly, she stood on her paws and gave a little stretch. That's when she felt something incredible: a tiny, little kick from within her belly. She jumped slightly, surprised at the sensation. Then she smiled softly and stroked her stomach with her tail.

"There, there, little ones," Hopeflame murmured so she wouldn't wake Brambleclaw. "Mama's just going for a night stroll."

She peeked her head out of the deputy den to take in the camp clearing. For a moment, she paused to listen for any signs of movement. Four sentries stood guard: Mousefur, Jaggedtooth, Swiftwind, and Fawnstep. They were all former TigerClan and ShadowClan warriors, clearly Tigerstar didn't trust the new arrivals.

Hopeflame decided to sneak through the dirtplace. She didn't want anyone to question her comings and goings, especially with tensions so high among the clan. Quietly, she approached the dirtplace entrance and slipped inside without alerting any of the sentries. Her nose turned up at the stench of the dirtplace, but she ignored it.

Luckily, Hopeflame found a gap underneath the brambles where she could slip through. The brambles pricked at her pelt like little claws as she crawled through. Once on the other side, she turned towards the moors then took off at a run.

The tree canopy overhead blocked out most of the moonlight, but thin strands peeked through. Hopeflame breathed in the fresh air as she ran, enjoying the feeling of it blowing in her long fur. She weaved through the undergrowth with as much speed and grace as a deer. Her paws hardly made a sound on the forest floor.

A thin layer of snow covered the ground and clung to the branches high above. The chill of leaf-bare hung in the air, a reminder that the forest was somewhat dormant. Many of the forest animals would be hibernating.

A few moments later, through the thinning trees, Hopeflame glimpsed the moors. Her time in WindClan came flooding back as she took her first steps out into the open. Hopeflame remembered Tawnyfur's patience when she trained her to be a WindClan cat.

Suddenly, Hopeflame realized that she had absolutely no clue what to do once she reached Highstones. Growing up in TigerClan, no one ever taught her about the mysteries of Highstones, nor what cats did once they got there. A sinking feeling settled in her belly and she slowed to a brisk trot.

What was she doing? Highstones was forbidden amongst TigerClan. Was she really going to disobey the Code just to satisfy her own curiosity? She shook her head, dismissing those thoughts. Now wasn't the time to question her actions. This was something that she *needed* to do.

An idea came to mind: she could stop by Barley's farm. With him living so close to Highstones, he might have an idea about it. With her decision made, she picked up the pace and changed her direction to Barley's farm.

After what seemed like only a few heartbeats, Hopeflame stood outside the barn where Barley and his family lived. Her mind flew back to the last time she was here, when Ravenpaw revealed to her the extent of Tigerstar's tragedy. How have things changed so quickly?

"Who's there?!" A voice from within the barn called out.

"It's me," She replied, a little tentative. "Hopeflame."

Stepping from the shadows, Barley wore suspicion and hatred equally well. At his flanks were Sunny and Rosie, each of them glaring at her with rivaling stares. They eyed her as if they were unsure what to make of her.

"Look," Hopeflame took a deep breath, her shoulders heaving, "I know that I've given you no reason to trust me, but I come in peace."

"That's what we thought last time before you turned on us in the heat of battle!" Sunny snarled, his fangs glinting in the moonlight.

Barley silenced his son with a low growl before facing Hopeflame once more. "What do you want?" His amber eyes were colder than a frozen stream.

Hopeflame bowed her head respectfully. "I believe that Graystripe has come to me in a dream. He warned me that I must visit Highstones, but I have no idea how to proceed."

Something like realization filled Barley's eyes. "Why would StarClan speak to you?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," She admitted, lowering her head in shame. "But I come asking for your help."

"Why should we help you?" Rosie hissed, her hackles raised. Anger burned in her green eyes.

"I-I have no reason to give," Hopeflame murmured softly. Very slowly, she raised her gaze to meet theirs. "But maybe, StarClan has a mission of their own."

Barley thought deeply for a moment, staring at her pensively. Then, he responded: "I will accompany you to Highstones." Sunny and Rosie spoke up in an uproar, but Barley quickly silenced them. "I am not one to stand in the way of StarClan. If it is truly StarClan's wish to speak with you, then I will help you on your journey."

He nodded to Sunny and Rosie. "Tell your mother and sister that I'll

return before dawn." Then, he turned to Hopeflame: "Shall we?"

Hopeflame brightened in excitement. This was it! She was going to visit Highstones! Barley led the way away from the farm. In the distance, Hopeflame could already see the rising stones against the skyline.

After all the running, Hopeflame began to feel exhausted. She didn't realize that her slightly swollen belly was enough to drain energy from her. Against her will, she slowed to catch her breath. Barley paused and turned back when he realized she wasn't following.

He padded up to her calmly then asked, "When are they due?"

"Excuse me?" Hopeflame asked, eyes widening with surprise.

"The kits." Barley featured towards her stomach. "You're clearly expecting."

"Not for another moon." Hopeflame replied.

"Congratulations," Barley meowed. "You must be excited."

She nodded eagerly. "Yes, but the timing couldn't be worse." Her tone became somber. "I don't want my kits growing up in a clan that is divided."

"Yes," Barley nodded, agreeing. "But life goes on." He nodded towards Highstones. "And StarClan doesn't like to wait."

Hopeflame took a deep breath before following Barley. He was right: life would go on.

And StarClan didn't like to be kept waiting.

Chapter 4

[image]

Hopeflame and Barley stood at the entrance to Highstones. She expected it to be more spectacular, but it was merely a tunnel in the rock hardly big enough for a full-grown warrior. Staring at it, she didn't understand why it was so revered. But she hoped that the inside might be more impressive.

"Follow me and stay close," Barley warned.

He disappeared into the tunnel, the last thing she saw was his tail tip. Hopeflame took a deep breath before following him inside. Immediately, the darkness swallowed her whole. Her fur stood on end at the sudden chill. She was certain that she could've seen her breath if it weren't for the darkness.

Each paw step felt like walking on ice. Every so often, water would drip from the rock overhead and fall onto her. With her eyesight dulled, every other sense seemed heightened. She even thought she could hear her own heartbeat.

Out of nowhere, Barley spoke up. "I remember coming here with Bluestar and Fireheart when he was just a 'paw." He sighed and Hopeflame pricked her ears with interest. "Now they're both gone, and Ravenpaw, too."

"I'm sorry," Hopeflame murmured softly. "For everything that's happened because of Tigerstar."

"It's not your fault," Barley mewed. "You just simply ended up a piece in his game."

Up ahead, a faint glow illuminated the tunnel. Hopeflame could faintly make out the silhouette of Barley against the light. Her whiskers twitched with eagerness to finally glimpse the Moonstone.

When they stepped from the tunnel and into Mothermouth,

Hopeflame was blinded by the light. She hissed and shielded her eyes with her paw. Slowly, her eyes adjusted, but she still struggled to gaze directly at the Moonstone.

It stood tall, almost filling the entire cave. Hopeflame stared up at the top that almost grazed the cave ceiling. Her jaw dropped in awe at its size. Never before had she imagined the Moonstone would be this impressive. She thought that everyone should see it, regardless if they believed in StarClan or not.

"What do I do now?" Hopeflame wondered out loud.

"Press your nose to its surface." Barley replied as he sat down. He curled his tail over his paws then motioned towards the stone. "Then you'll fall asleep and wake up in StarClan."

A chill ran down Hopeflame's spine. This was it: she was finally going to see if StarClan was real. Maybe she would see Graystripe and Stormblaze? Oh, how she missed them!

Hopeflame took one tentative step then another towards the stone until she stood right in front of it. She closed her eyes before pressing her nose to its surface and she gasped. It was cold to the touch and filled her entire body with a chill.

Almost immediately, Hopeflame swayed on her paws with tiredness. She laid down at the base of the Moonstone then curled into a ball. Before she knew it, everything around her faded away...

~*~

When Hopeflame opened her eyes, she found herself in unfamiliar terrain. She expected the forest to mimic the season of their forest, but there wasn't a snowflake or icicle to be seen. Everything seemed to give off an unearthly light, almost like the moon or the sun. The air felt warm like it did on a nice greenleaf day. For a moment, she closed her eyes to enjoy the warmth and let it soak into her russet pelt.

"Hopeflame?"

In a heartbeat, she spun around on her heels to face whoever acknowledged her. Standing before her was a blue-grey she-cat with eyes

bluer than the purest stream. Her muzzle was nearly white with age, and a scar crossed over her shoulder. In spite of this, she was extremely beautiful. She had a quiet authority about herself that intimidated Hopeflame.

"Who are you?" She finally asked, her voice wavered slightly. "Is this StarClan?"

The she-cat huffed softly, amusement twinkling in her blue eyes. "Yes, Hopeflame, you're in StarClan." Then she bowed her head in greeting. "My name is Bluestar. You may have heard of me?"

"B-Bluestar?!" Hopeflame's jaw dropped and her green eyes widened. "I, uh, yes: I've heard of you."

"Come with me, child." Bluestar mewed. "All of StarClan would like to meet you."

"A-All of them?" Hopeflame stuttered. She couldn't believe that she was really standing here in StarClan, much less that they would all *want to meet her. "But why? Who am I to them?"*

Bluestar's face became solemn. "Their last hope."

Without another word, Bluestar turned to walk away. Hopeflame stared after her for a moment before realizing that she was meant to follow. Together, they walked through StarClan's forest which seemed to get more beautiful with each glance. Questions swirled in her mind, questions she was scarred to voice. What did Bluestar mean by 'their last hope'?

Hopeflame followed Bluestar through the brush and found herself in a clearing surrounded by stone walls taller than Fourtrees. The cliff walls had ledges where StarClan cats perched. She's never seen so many cats before! Their eyes focused on her instantly with curiosity.

Down the center of the cliffs, a starry waterfall poured into a pool that reflected Starpelt overhead. In the center of the pool, a grassy island stood with a great ancient oak reaching for the stars. At the base of the oak, a cluster of more StarClan cats sat...waiting.

Among them, Hopeflame instantly recognized Graystripe and

Stormblaze, but she refrained from running to greet them. Under the stares of all these StarClan cats, that might not be polite. Bluestar led her to a stone bridge that crossed to the island. As she got closer, Hopeflame got a better look at the other cats waiting at the tree.

One was a long-furred, dark grey she-cat with yellow eyes. Another had a bright, ginger tabby pelt with white paws and chest. He had brilliant, vibrant amber eyes. Sitting next to him was a sleek, dark gray tom with golden eyes. The last of them was a long-furred russet tom with green eyes.

Out of those four, it was the ginger tom to step forward to greet her. "Hello, Hopeflame." He dipped his head to her in greeting. "Do you know who I am?"

Slowly, she shook her head 'no'. She didn't recognize any of them. "I'm sorry, but I don't."

He lifted his head proudly, eyes gleaming. "My name is Thunderstar...I'm the founder of ThunderClan, it's first leader."

For a moment, all Hopeflame could manage to do was stare. This was Thunderstar? The first leader of ThunderClan was actually standing before her?!

When she didn't say anything, Thunderstar motioned to the cats behind him. "The grey she-cat is Yellowfang, the russet tom is Pineheart, and that sleek grey tom is Gray Wing."

"I-I think I've heard of you, Yellowfang." Hopeflame mewed shyly. "Cinderpelt used to talk about you all the time."

Emotion filled the old she-cat's eyes, brimming with tears. "I hope that she spoke well of me."

Hopeflame nodded eagerly, "Only good things."

The russet tom, Pineheart, stepped forward to stand beside Thunderstar. "You don't know me, Hopeflame, but I believe that you're quite familiar with my grandson: Brambleclaw."

Realization hit Hopeflame like a gust of wind. "That must make you

Tigerstar's father..."

Pineheart nodded, "Yes, I am." Emotions swirled in his green irises. "I saw the darkness in my son, but never did I once think he could be capable of such evil."

The last of them, Gray Wing, came forward to meet Hopeflame's gaze. "I belonged to the group of cats that settled the forest. We started the Clans, and I raised Thunderstar like my own."

"You raised me well," Thunderstar commented, eyes filled with fondness.

Hopeflame became the center of their attention once more. "Hopeflame," Thunderstar began, "We've summoned you here because Tigerstar's darkness has infected the entire forest."

"Let me explain," Yellowfang spoke up, eyeing Hopeflame. "When Tigerstar killed Fireheart, he sent the entire forest down an alternate path, one that was never meant to be." She sighed heavily, lowering her head. "Fireheart was meant to become leader one day and your mother, Sandstorm, was supposed to become his mate."

Immediately, Hopeflame became uncomfortable. "So, you're saying that we're living an alternate reality that was never supposed to happen?"

Yellowfang blinked softly. "Correct. TigerClan was never meant to exist, at least, not this way. You were never meant to be born as Hopeflame. Fireheart was meant to be your father, not Graystripe. Your name was supposed to be Squirrelflight."

Hopeflame began to bristle at this. "So you're telling me that I'm not supposed to exist? That everything around me is a lie?!"

"Hopeflame," Bluestar meowed, touching the tip of her tail to Hopeflame's shoulder. "You're the only one that can reverse this. We need to change our reality before it's too late."

Everything around Hopeflame became frozen. Reverse this? Make everything, everyone she knows and loves, nonexistent?

"What if I don't want to do it?" Hopeflame hissed. "What's so wrong with

this reality? Why does this one need to be destroyed rather than the other one?!"

"It's how it's meant to be," Gray Wing meowed gently. "Reality is a tricky thing. Just because this is the one that persevered, doesn't mean it's the one that's meant to be."

"Well, I don't care." Hopeflame snarled at them, her fur standing on end. "If I do this, my love for Brambleclaw goes away! My kits will never be born! Graystripe won't be my father! Who knows if my littermates will even be born?!"

"We can't make you do anything, Hopeflame," Pineheart growled.

"But the forest needs you to make a choice, Hopeflame." Thunderstar cautioned, "Their fate depends on you. It's your choice."

Everything around her suddenly became blurry, causing Hopeflame to wobble. StarClan was fading around her and fast. "No, wait!" Hopeflame called. "I have so many more questions!"

Before everything went dark, Hopeflame heard Bluestar's voice echoing in her ears: "It's your choice, Hopeflame."

Chapter 5

[image] [image]

Hopeflame's green eyes snapped open to find herself back in Mothermouth beside the Moonstone. She gasped for breath as if she'd been drowning underwater. Barley laid quietly near the tunnel entrance, but he stirred when he realized that she was awake. "Thank StarClan, I was beginning to worry!"

Her green eyes flickered towards the Moonstone. Somehow, it's light seemed to have dimmed since she's been asleep. Had she really walked among StarClan and spoken with them? Part of her didn't want it to be real after what they told her. She suddenly felt very nauseous when she remembered their words to her, that she was their last hope to reverse some alternate reality that was never meant to be.

Anger bubbled in her belly at the thought. StarClan didn't care that reversing the timeline would eliminate nearly everyone she loved! Everyone born after Fireheart's death may never come to exist! Her love for Brambleclaw would disappear as well as their unborn kits. At the thought, she protectively curled her tail around her swollen abdomen. She would die before any harm came to her kits.

"Hopeflame?" Barley wondered, staring at her in confusion. "What did StarClan say?"

She shook her head, trying to erase the memory. "I-I have to go." Without another word, Hopeflame dashed from Mothermouth, leaving Barley staring after her.

Her paws thrummed against the stone as she desperately raced down the tunnel. Hopeflame's chest constricted so she could hardly breath. She gasped for breath, knowing that she needed fresh air but wouldn't find it surrounded by rock. Up ahead, Hopeflame could make out the faint light outside illuminating the tunnel.

Hopeflame exploded out of the tunnel into a blizzard that flung

snow flurries against her face. She hissed in surprise, halting in her tracks. Before her, the blizzard made it nearly impossible to see with the cloak of night. If she tried to find her way back to Fourtrees, she might get lost in this storm.

Barley appeared from behind her quietly. "A storm like this can be deadly," He mused then glanced at her. "Why don't you come back to the farm? You can leave when the storm quiets down."

A sinking feeling settled in Hopeflame's stomach. After the news she heard, all she wanted was to return to Fourtrees so she could curl up in Brambleclaw's embrace. She didn't want to spend any more time away from him than she needed to. StarClan's words echoed in her head like a tide that kept regressing then returning full-force.

But Barley spoke reason. It was easy to get turned around in a blizzard like this one, especially at night. She couldn't imagine getting lost and lying down in the snow. She couldn't imagine the numbness creeping in until it stopped her heart. She couldn't imagine dying that way.

"Very well," Hopeflame meowed.

She allowed Barley to lead the way through the storm back to his farm. Her head hung low as she contemplated the message from StarClan. How was she supposed to change an entire reality? Why did this responsibility even fall to her? Who decided these things, or was it simply fate?

Her paws slowly turned numb as they shuffled through the deep snow. It came all the way up to her chest fur now. She knew that she made the right choice to return with Barley to the farm since it wasn't too far. If she had tried to make it back to Fourtrees, she knew that she wouldn't have made it.

After what felt like a lifetime of walking in this blizzard, Hopeflame glimpsed the dark outline of the barn against the opaque flurries. Her heart lifted with relief because she didn't know how much longer she could go on. Barley led the way through the swirling snow until they reached the barn door.

Sunny and Rosie appeared, hackles raised since it was difficult to recognize them. "Who goes there?!" Sunny growled with his back arched in warning.

"Rest easy, son, it's us." Barley called out. As they neared, Sunny and Rosie relaxed.

"Why's she here?" Rosie sneered, casting a glare in Hopeflame's direction.

Barley lashed his tail. "She would've died trying to travel back to Fourtrees in this storm." His calculating amber gaze fell onto his kits. "I raised you better than to cast out someone in need."

At his words, Sunny dipped his head. "Yes, Father." He gestured for them to follow him into the barn.

The barn offered welcome warmth and shelter from the blizzard raging outside. Hopeflame stumbled into the barn on frozen paws and icicles hanging from her whiskers. She shivered so hard that it shook her body. It felt like the time she saved Soarwing from the frozen river.

Hopeflame's eyes adjusted to the shadows to take in the stacks of hay bales. In the back corner of the barn, they found Butterfly, Maisie, Oliver, and the four kits waiting. Immediately, the four little ones ran to greet Barley excitedly.

"Hi, kits," His nose twitched in amusement at his daughter's kits. He obviously felt a great deal of love for his family, something Hopeflame couldn't say the same of for Tigerstar. To him, her kits with Brambleclaw were just a legacy, nothing more and nothing less.

A sinking feeling settled in her stomach. If she reversed this reality, then perhaps Tigerstar's legacy would end with Brambleclaw and Tawnypelt. Then she realized further that Brambleclaw would fall in love with another she-cat in the new reality. That hurt more than anything she's felt all day.

"Dear, are you okay?" Butterfly questioned in a soft tone.

Hopeflame took a deep breath and shook her head. "Not even a little bit."

"StarClan will take care of whatever is troubling you," Maisie murmured softly.

Hopeflame appreciated Maisie's enthusiasm and Butterly's compassion, but neither would change what StarClan told her. Everything was about to change whether she wanted it to or not.

Chapter 6

[image]

Morning finally arrived after a long night of shadows and cold. Last night, Hopeflame had fallen asleep in a separate corner from Barley and his family. She couldn't bring herself to brush pelts with the cats she betrayed. They nestled together just like any clan would. Barley and Butterfly slept snuggled close, Oliver curled protectively around Maisie and their kits, then Sunny and Rosie slept soundly side by side.

Hopeflame woke at the first sign of dawn before they could wake. As soon as the first rays of sunlight beamed into the barn, she was on her paws. The last thing she wanted was to have more awkward conversations with cats who she had betrayed. Barley allowed her here, that's the only reason they put up with her presence.

She quickly got to her paws then stretched before heading to the door of the barn. "Leaving so soon?" Hopeflame turned on her heels with hackles raised to see Barley's head raised with his eyes focused on her intently.

"I have to go," Hopeflame explained, shuffling her front paws. "TigerClan will become suspicious..."

Barley stood up and stretched then walked over to her calmly. "I understand, but if I may offer you some quick advice, Hopeflame?"

She contemplated for a moment, then nodded. Barley cleared his throat before speaking. "Whatever it is that StarClan said to you, don't take it lightly." A glimmer of worry settled in his amber eyes. "They have a way of always getting what they want."

Hopeflame lifted her head defiantly to meet Barley's gaze. "StarClan doesn't decide my fate: I do."

Without another word, Hopeflame turned and left. Outside the shadows of the barn, dawn light greeted her. It glistened against the

fresh snow that covered the ground and everything in its path. A chill hung in the air, causing Hopeflame to fluff out her thick pelt against the cold. The tall snow reached past her belly fur which made every step a struggle.

She started off at a brisk trot in the direction of Fourtrees. Hopeflame had no idea what she was going to tell Brambleclaw and the rest of the clan. Surely Tigerstar would be curious as to her whereabouts. Did Brambleclaw notice her absence last night? Hopeflame would be shocked if he hadn't sent out a search party for her.

These pestering thoughts circled in her mind like a band of hungry crows. She knew that when she returned, they would demand answers. The question was, how much would she tell them? Hopeflame's stomach knotted at the thought of keeping secrets from Brambleclaw, but what else was she supposed to do? He wouldn't take kindly to her conversing with StarClan.

Her legs were tired from the strain of pushing through the snow by the time the tree line came into view. She heaved for breath so hard that her sides visibly rose and fell. Overhead, the sun had begun slowly climbing its way into the sky. The pink light of dawn had faded away to give way to the full-force of the sun.

Hopeflame welcomed the cover of the trees as soon as she stepped into their shadows. Even after her time on WindClan's moors, the trees always felt like home to her. They wrapped her in their embrace like Brambleclaw did on particularly cold nights.

To her left, Hopeflame heard the shuffling of someone like her walking through the snow. Her hackles raised as she prepared to greet friend or foe. The clans may be united, but they could never call a truce with the foxes and badgers that roamed the forest. Then, a tabby-colored head peeked out of the snow-covered brush.

"Owlgaze," Hopeflame greeted her brother with a sigh of relief. She wasn't sure she had enough energy to fend off a fox or badger.

He bounced over to her then rubbed his cheek against hers. "I'm so relieved that you're okay. Everyone's been so worried. Brambleclaw

took a patrol out but we lost your scent when the blizzard started."

Hopeflame quickly thought up a believable lie: "I went for a walk on the moors but when the blizzard started I took shelter in the old WindClan dens." She hated lying to her brother, but he would never understand. He's always been so opposed to StarClan just like Tigerstar preached.

Owlgaze nodded, easily believing her. She has never given him a reason not to trust her, so why wouldn't he? "Brambleclaw and the others aren't too far. We thought it best to split up. Come on."

He turned with a flick of his tail, leaving Hopeflame to follow him. They traveled silently through the forest but Hopeflame thought that was best. She didn't want to have a slip of the tongue which would surely make Owlgaze suspicious.

Through the trees, Hopeflame glimpsed Brambleclaw conversing with Mapleheart and Sandstorm. When they saw her, their eyes lit up, but Brambleclaw raced to her side. He immediately licked her cheek then twined his tail with hers.

"I was so worried, Hopeflame," He murmured softly so close to her ear that she could feel his warm breath on her face. "When we couldn't find you last night, I feared the worst."

Hopeflame opened her mouth to speak but she couldn't find the words to describe how she felt. Anger bubbled in her belly, fear constricted her chest, and worry numbed her head. All she could manage was to rest her head against Brambleclaw's chest. It was the only place where she felt safe at the moment.

"I missed you," She managed to whisper.

Brambleclaw nuzzled her gently. He seemed to sense her distress but didn't question her. "Let's get back to camp. I'm sure you must be hungry and tired."

Hopeflame turned to find the loving faces of her mother and littermates. She studied them each, wondering if any of them survived in the alternate reality, but only StarClan knows. A

realization hit her. She believed in StarClan now.

In a matter of one night, everything she knew turned upside down. StarClan was real. Graystripe and Stormblaze were there looking as real as the days they'd died. StarClan was real.

And they were counting on her.

Chapter 7

[image]

Upon returning to camp, they were greeted by Brightflower. Although she had just recently kitted, she looked as energetic as ever. The sun shimmered against her healthy orange and white tabby pelt. "Owlgaze," She meowed, waving her tail excitedly. "Featherstream just had her kits!"

Immediately, Owlgaze's green eyes widened with surprise and excitement. "Where is she?!"

"In the nursery, fluff-brain," Brightflower huffed bemusedly. "And she's asking for you as well, Hopeflame."

At Brightflower's words, Hopeflame stared at her in shock. Why would Featherstream want to see her? Especially at such an important moment? Ever since Stormblaze's death, Featherstream's shut her out of her life...for good reason. Hopeflame could still smell his blood after he died protecting her from Blackclaw and the other traitors.

Owlgaze didn't wait for her. He darted towards the nursery without second thought and she watched him duck inside. Brightflower followed after him, probably to tend to her kits. Hopeflame hesitated, unsure if she should follow.

"You know, Hopeflame," Sandstorm whispered softly to her, "I really think Featherstream misses her sister."

Brambleclaw nodded in agreement. He touched his nose to Hopeflame's cheek. "I think your mother is right: you're the closest thing to kin she has right now."

With their encouragement, Hopeflame decided that she would comply with Featherstream's wishes. She nuzzled both Brambleclaw and Sandstorm before padding towards the nursery. At the entrance, Hopeflame paused. She hasn't been inside a nursery since

her kithood days, and it wouldn't be long until she joined the other queens inside.

Hopeflame disappeared inside and was blinded by the darkness. When her eyes finally adjusted, she could clearly take in the layout of the new den. It was large, much bigger than the old TigerClan den where she was raised.

The branches arched and intertwined overhead with brambles making up the majority of the den walls. Snow had covered the brush, so the snow acted as a natural insulator which made the nursery warm and inviting.

There were four large nests for the queens and their kits: Runningbrook, Brightflower, Ferncloud, and finally Featherstream. Hopeflame's gaze fell upon her sister who lay curled around two small kits in the back corner of the nursery. Owlgaze sat at her side, whispering excitedly to her. Featherstream purred at something he said then lifted her head to notice Hopeflame standing at the entrance.

"You came," Featherstream meowed with surprise.

Hopeflame offered a small smile then walked over. "Of course I came: you're my sister."

She neared the nest and peeked at the two little kits nestled in the curve of Featherstream's belly. Hopeflame took an involuntary sharp intake of breath at the sight of them. One was a tom and the other a she-kit. The she-kit was an exact replica of Featherstream, long-fur and all. The tom had a light brown tabby pelt like Owlgaze, except he also had a white face and belly.

"They look like you both," Hopeflame mewed, glancing at her brother and half-sister. That was enough to remind her of the tainted blood that ran through these two kits' veins. As much as it sickened Hopeflame to think about, they were still her niece and nephew...double-fold.

She watched as Featherstream gently licked them each as they nursed. "Owlgaze and I are naming our daughter Silverkit...after my

mother." Then she lifted her blue eyes to look Hopeflame in the eye. "We want you to name our son."

All Hopeflame could do was stand there, dumbfounded. After Hopeflame's betrayal, why would Featherstream want her to name her son? That was an honor she never expected after the RiverClan Merge and Stormblaze's death.

"Why would you give me such an honor, Featherstream?" Hopeflame questioned, shaking her head. "I betrayed you."

Featherstream connected her gaze to Hopeflame's, seriousness settling in her blue orbs. "Hopeflame, I've forgiven you. You alone didn't conquer RiverClan or WindClan. Your claws didn't end Stormblaze's life. I realize that now."

Hopeflame didn't realize it, but tears trailed down her cheeks. She didn't know until now how much it meant to have Featherstream's forgiveness. It felt like a huge weight was lifted from her shoulders, like she could finally breath again.

"Thank you, Featherstream," Hopeflame stammered, struggling to speak through gasping breath. "I'm sorry."

Featherstream reaches up to brush her cheek against Hopeflame's. "You're my sister, Hopeflame. There's nothing you could do that I wouldn't forgive."

Owlgaze watched them with happiness flickering in his green eyes. "Now, a name for our son?" There was a teasing tone in his voice that she hasn't heard much since they were kits. Just like her, Owlgaze has been forced to grow up too soon under Tigerstar's pressure.

Hopeflame glanced at her brother and sister, then realized that Mapleheart and Free should be here, too. "One moment! I'll be right back!"

She emerged from the nursery with searching eyes. After a moment, she spotted Mapleheart eating a rabbit with Cinderpelt and Free sharing tongues with Skybreeze. Hopeflame trotted over to Free and

Skybreeze, she couldn't hide the joyous feeling bubbling in her chest.

Free and Skybreeze looked up as she approached, and she noticed resentment in both their eyes. During her time in WindClan, Skybreeze had been welcoming to her, then she betrayed the clan. Hopeflame couldn't blame her for how she felt. And Free, too, felt the sting of her betrayal.

"Free, come with me to the nursery: Featherstream had her kits," Hopeflame explained. Maybe if he knew it was for their sister and not her, then he would come.

"Why should I care?" Free growled as he glared at her.

Hopeflame lashed her tail with annoyance. "Because she's our sister and Owlgaze is our brother."

For a moment, Free hesitated and seemed like he would argue further, but then he nodded. "Fine." He nodded to Skybreeze before following Hopeflame over to Mapleheart.

"Want to go see Owlgaze and Featherstream's kits?" Hopeflame asked cheerfully.

Mapleheart nodded enthusiastically. She glanced at Cinderpelt. "I'll be right back."

Cinderpelt purred, "Of course."

Hopeflame hadn't noticed, but Cinderpelt's tom-kit, Smokekit, laid at her side sleeping. She remembered when Brambleclaw told her that Cinderpelt had been forced to have kits with Jaggedtooth because of TigerClan's Code. Hopeflame couldn't imagine being forced to have kits against her will.

With Free and Mapleheart at her side, Hopeflame returned to the nursery. Inside they were greeted by warmth. Hopeflame padded towards Owlgaze and Featherstream where they waited expectantly. Owlgaze eyed Free suspiciously, but he didn't say anything. It was strange to think that they had a full-blooded brother that they never knew about until a moon ago.

"Have you thought of a name for him?" Featherstream asked, gesturing to the little tom kit.

"What did you name the she-kit?" Mapleheart questioned.

"Her name is Silverkit," Featherstream replied with a bittersweet smile. "After my mother: Silverstream."

Free nodded with approval and Mapleheart purred loudly. "They're both such strong-looking kits," Mapleheart commented with approval.

Hopeflame thought to herself as the others fawned over the two kits. They indeed were strong-looking kits, handsome and beautiful. Silverkit was a fitting name for the she-kit since Hopeflame knew how much Featherstream resented never knowing her mother. That gave her an idea!

"I know what to name the tom-kit!" Hopeflame exclaimed suddenly. The eyes of her siblings were all on her. "He should be named Stormkit...after Stormblaze."

Tears welled up in Featherstream's blue eyes as she thought of her brother. "That's perfect, Hopeflame, thank you."

The five of them stayed there for a while, admiring Silverkit and Stormkit. They didn't think about the Merges or Tigerstar's deadly reign. Hopeflame didn't think about the impossible task placed on her shoulders by StarClan. In that moment, they were just siblings enjoying the miracle of life.

Chapter 8

[image]

Through the undergrowth, Hopeflame's sharp eyes spotted a rabbit chewing on some browned vegetation peeking through the snow. She flattened her ears and instinctively dropped into a hunting crouch. After the moons of moving from clan to clan as part of Tigerstar's devious plan, it felt good to simply hunt for her clanmates. It was refreshing to be just another TigerClan warrior.

Hopeflame would never admit it, but it was becoming harder to complete simple tasks like hunting and patrolling because her pregnant belly was growing. She had sworn that she wouldn't move to the nursery until she was round and slow. But every morning that day creeped closer and closer.

She set one paw in front of the other very carefully to avoid disturbing the snow. Her green eyes focused intently on the rabbit as it remained completely oblivious to her. Hopeflame crept closer, but her tail accidentally disturbed a clump of snow on a bush.

Immediately, the rabbit ran off and Hopeflame cursed. "Fox-dung!" She surged forward to give chase after the rabbit, but already she felt tired. Her lungs heaved for breath and in only a couple strides she had to stop for breath.

"Hopeflame?" From around the snow-covered undergrowth appeared Ebonypaw.

The black tom apprentice was growing quickly and turning into a lean tom. But Hopeflame was beginning to accept that she would need to join the nursery...and soon. She wouldn't be able to finish his training. Maybe it was time for Owlgaze to take over.

"I caught a mouse and a vole," Ebonypaw boasted proudly after setting down his catches. His eyes shone with pride. "What've you caught?"

Hopeflame's pelt burned with embarrassment. She averted her eyes from him to hide it. "Well, uh, that's what we need to talk about." She sighed heavily, her shoulders heaving. "I think it's time that I join the nursery."

Ebonypaw nodded, seeming to understand right away. He was very mature for his age, something that she had always admired about him. "Of course, Hopeflame. Will Owlgaze be finishing my training?"

"Yes," Hopeflame replied with a nod. "I've already spoken with Tigerstar about it. When we get back to camp I'll have to speak with him again."

The black tom stood up and fluffed out his fur against the cold. "Let's get going, then." He picked up the mouse and Hopeflame carried the vole for him.

Together, they walked back to camp side by side. Hopeflame felt a twinge of sadness begin to overwhelm her. Ebonypaw was her first apprentice and she wouldn't be able to finish his training. She hoped that someday she might have an apprentice that she could see all the way through. While she was in the nursery, she would have to watch as Ebonypaw became a warrior under her brother's guidence.

Then another thought crossed her mind, stopping her dead in her tracks: what would happen to Ebonypaw if she altered the timeline like StarClan wanted her to? He most surely wouldn't exist because he was born of two different clan parents: Runningwind and Darkflower. Her chest constricted with anxiety which made it hard for her to breathe.

"You coming, Hopeflame?" Ebonypaw called over his shoulder.

Hopeflame shook her head and those pesky thoughts from her mind. "Right behind you!" She mewed as she trotted to catch up with her apprentice.

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When Hopeflame slipped through the camp entrance with Ebonypaw, they found the camp in mourning. Many of the senior warriors were gathered at the center of the clearing around what Hopeflame presumed to be a dead body. "Go place your catches on the pile," Hopeflame ordered Ebonypaw. Her green eyes scanned the clearing before landing on Sandstorm.

She padded across the clearing to meet her mother at the edge of the gathered cats. "What happened?" Hopeflame wondered.

Sandstorm's lips curled in a silent snarl. "Oakfur's dead. He caught greencough but Tigerstar wouldn't allow the healers to treat him." She lowered her head to hide the rage seething inside her. "He said the healers needn't waste their precious supplies."

"What?" Hopeflame gasped, nearly taken aback by what Sandstorm told her. "Tigerstar let Oakfur die?" She immediately wondered if Brambleclaw knew about this.

"Mousefur's caught it, too," Sandstorm explained. Her pale green eyes hardened with anger. "Tigerstar is allowing the healers to treat her. Why is Mousefur's life worth more than Oakfur's?" She spit in the dirt before her paws. "Death take Tigerstar to the Dark Forest!"

"Shh," Hopeflame warned with a hiss. She looked around to see if anyone heard Sandstorm, but luckily no one did. "Don't let anyone hear you saying such a thing!" Didn't her mother have more sense than to say such things out loud? Sandstorm knew what happened to cats that opposed Tigerstar: they died.

Sandstorm pulled away from Hopeflame forcefully. "This never would have happened if Bluestar were still alive!" Sandstorm growled under her breath so that only Hopeflame could hear. Before Hopeflame could reply, Sandstorm stomped off to the warriors' den. Her tail lashed angrily as she disappeared inside with Hopeflame looking after her.

Hopeflame knew that she needed to find Brambleclaw immediately. She hurried towards the den they shared, but he wasn't inside. The next place to check was Tigerstar's den. As fast as she could, Hopestar approached the den and let out a little chirp to announce

herself. When she heard Tigerstar reply with an "enter", she slipped inside.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness inside the den. Tigerstar sat in front of his nest in all his bloody glory with Brambleclaw situated in front of him. The two toms watched her enter, Brambleclaw with relief and Tigerstar with curiosity. "Hopeflame!" Brambleclaw stood up to greet her by rubbing his cheek against hers.

After the moment passed, Hopeflame settled her green eyes on Tigerstar. "Oakfur is dead?"

Tigerstar sneered at her. "He was old. Death happens."

"He died from *greencough*," Hopeflame retorted, trying to watch her tone. "He could've been treated by the healers and *lived*!"

In that instant, Tigerstar's amber gaze darkened with what Hopeflame assumed to be either irritation or anger, possibly both. "In case you haven't noticed, Hopeflame, it's leaf-bare." His voice could've chilled the entire river. "We need to conserve our resources and not waste them on an old cat."

Hopeflame opened her mouth to argue, but then she felt the light touch of Brambleclaw's tail on her shoulder, *warning* her not to speak. She desperately wanted to argue, to speak out against Tigerstar's cruelty, but she thought better of it. If she argued too much, Tigerstar might question her loyalty and have her disposed of. He could easily make it look like an accident, and she had her unborn kits to think of.

Her tail twitched with the silent anger brewing inside her heart. "Anyways," Hopeflame meowed cooly with her eyes down at her paws. "I came here to tell you I'm ready to join the nursery, so Owlgaze can take over Ebonypaw's training." With that said, she turned and stormed out of the den before either Tigerstar or Brambleclaw could stop her.

TigerClan was quickly becoming a place in which she did not want to live.

~*~

A/N

Sorry for making you wait so long. I'm a senior in college and I also work full-time at a daycare, so I'm extremely busy.

Chapter 9

[image]

The darkness that crept over the forest seemed colder that night unlike any other before. Thick snowflakes fell softly from the sky, as if StarClan had ordered them to fall in silence out of respect for the vigil that stood for Oakfur. They sat gathered around his lifeless body with their heads lowered in mourning. Among them were Runningnose, Tallpoppy, and Fawnstep: all former ShadowClan cats.

For the first time since ShadowClan'a merge, she became aware of the tension between them, so tense that it could be snapped like an icicle. Hopeflame glanced from the vigil to Tigerstar's den, wondering not for the first time if the cruel leader realized the consequences of his actions. The former ShadowClan warriors probably thought Tigerstar didn't value their lives as much as the original TigerClan cats.

Hopeflame didn't join them. She hovered between the mourning and those responsible for it. Their pain and suffering struck her like a blow to the chest, much like the pain caused from each Merge. Her hackles raised at the memories. She had hoped to be finished with that pain, to leave it in the past. But, clearly, her clanmates still felt the weight of the Merges heavy in their hearts.

Brambleclaw's voice startled her: "Hopeflame?" He nudged her shoulder gently. "It's late, you should come sleep."

"I can't sleep," She murmured low enough so no one else would hear her. "I can't ignore their pain."

A flicker of annoyance danced in Brambleclaw's eyes before it disappeared. "He was too old, Hopeflame. We need to conserve our supplies."

In that instant, Hopeflame spun to face him with fangs bared from anger. "That's exactly what your father said! Do you not have a

mind of your own now, Brambleclaw? Or do you just believe everything your daddy tells you?"

The fur along his spine rose with indignation. "Don't be ridiculous. Of course I can think for myself!"

"Then prove it." Hopeflame growled with anger flashing in her eyes. All the suffering brought on by Tigerstar swirled in her mind like a storm. She had to orchestrate the fall of two clans because he demanded it. Never again. Hopeflame studied Brambleclaw for some hint of remorse or regret, but she found neither. "Right now, all I see standing in front of me is Tigerstar's shadow!"

Before Brambleclaw could respond, she marched past Oakfur's vigil and straight out of camp. She needed some fresh air away from the constricting grasp of Tigerstar and Brambleclaw. She loved Brambleclaw, that much she knew, but she couldn't believe that he would side with his father on this. He's come so far from the innocent kit she used to play with.

The crisp, cool air outside Fourtrees enveloped Hopeflame as if she's dived into the river. A chill raced along her spine, which she ignored as she trotted away from the camp. From behind her, she heard the familiar footfalls of Brambleclaw.

"I need a moment alone, Brambleclaw," She growled with irritation.

He loped up to her and fell into step beside her. "Hopeflame...you need to understand: he's my father. He holds me to higher expectations than anyone else." When she didn't say anything and merely continued walking, he added: "Can't you see how hard this is for me?"

With no one near them, Hopeflame unleashed all the rage she's burrowed deep within her for so long. "Your father's an evil tyrant, Brambleclaw! There's so much that you don't know or understand!" Hopeflame raised her green eyes to meet his with desperation glowing within them. "I know how they feel. I lost my father, my brother, and I betrayed two clans for your father. I'm *exhausted*."

"Then tell me what I don't understand!" He roared with anger.

Almost immediately, he felt ashamed. Brambleclaw moved closer to brush his nose against her fur, but Hopeflame pulled away. "I'm sorry," He murmured. "I know how much you've lost."

"No, clearly you don't because you still follow your father. You still side with him when he causes so much suffering." Hopeflame's throat tightened with all the emotion she forced herself to hold back. "You're taking his side over the good of the clan."

"That's not fair, Hopeflame," Brambleclaw argued, the fires of desperation dancing in his amber eyes. "I'm his *deputy*, I have to obey him. Tell me what I don't know."

Hopeflame shook her head and released a sigh. What else could she possibly say to make him see reason. Brambleclaw was loyal, especially to his kin regardless of their sins. Clearly, she wouldn't be able to talk sense into him. She certainly couldn't tell him about her journey to Highstones. He'd write StarClan off as foolish madness.

"It wouldn't matter if I told you," Hopeflame confessed as she studied him for his response. "You wouldn't believe me."

With that said, she brushed passed him to return to Fourtrees. At the last moment, Hopeflame paused. She didn't look at him, she didn't turn around. She simply announced: "I'll be staying in the nursery until the kits are born."

Hopeflame heard the beginnings of an argument before she took off towards Fourtrees. She entered camp in a hurry which earned her some surprised stares. She hid her emotions well as she feigned calmness. Hopeflame padded towards the nursery where she hoped to find comfort with Featherstream.

When she stepped into the nursery, she noted that almost everyone was asleep. The only one awake was Featherstream. She lifted her graceful silver head in surprise at Hopeflame.

"What're you doing here, Hopeflame?" Featherstream wondered out loud quietly. Silverkit and Stormkit were sleeping soundly.

Hopeflame gasped for breath as the tears began streaming down her

russet cheeks. "I-I had a fight with Brambleclaw..."

Featherstream beckoned her closer. "You can share my nest tonight. Tomorrow morning we can make you your own." Hopeflame whispered her thanks as she curled up back to back with Featherstream. "Do you want to talk about it?" Her sister asked gently.

Hopeflame shook her head. "No, it wouldn't change a thing."

The rhythmic breathing of Featherstream brought Hopeflame back to the RiverClan camp where she shared a den with her and Stormblaze. Then, she had been a pawn in Tigerstar's grand scheme. Even so, they had been some of the happiest moons of her life. Hopeflame drifted to sleep with images of playing with Featherstream and Stormblaze and training with Graystripe in her mind.

Chapter 10

Shadows ebbed through every part of the forest and the tree canopy above was so intertwined it blocked out Starpelt. A chill settled in the air, burrowing deep in Hopeflame's bones. She fluffed out her thick pelt against the cold, but it wasn't nearly enough.

Her green eyes surveyed the tree-line for any sign of life. Was this StarClan? She wondered to herself for a moment before immediately banishing that thought. No, StarClan's Forest had been teeming with light and warmth. This had to be the Dark Forest.

Fear sent shivers down her spine as she remembered Wrath, the black tom who seemed intent on ensuring she followed Tigerstar's orders. As if on cue, the tom stepped from the shadows. Hopeflame shuffled her paws nervously. What did he want with her now?

"All four clans are Merged," Wrath said with a purr. "You've done well, Hopeflame."

She flattened her ears as he drew nearer. "I obeyed Tigerstar like you asked. Now leave me in peace."

Wrath laughed in a way that could only be described as maniacal. Hopeflame wanted to leave. Now that she believed in StarClan, it felt very wrong to be here in the Dark Forest with Wrath. She knew that Bluestar wouldn't approve.

The black tom clicked his tongue as if he were chastising a kit. "We're not through yet, Hopeflame. TigerClan is too seeded with traitors for me to walk away willfully. There are those who don't believe in Tigerstar's mission."

Hopeflame glanced up at the sky in an effort to glimpse Starpelt, but all she could see were the gnarled trees. She lowered her head to meet Wrath's stare. "I'm done being anyone's pawn. You and Tigerstar will have to find another cat to do your bidding." Her voice shook as she said it for fear of how he'd react.

Wrath's gaze turned cold as the chill that gripped the Dark Forest. He moved closer to tower over her. "Done?" His voice dripped with disdain. "You can't just decide to be done, dear Hopeflame."

She lifted her chin defiantly and tried not to quiver in fear. "I am. I walk with StarClan now."

Something sinister flickered in his gaze that terrified Hopeflame. She wanted to wake up. Now.

The black tom moved closer until their noses were only a whisker-length apart. "You'll never walk with StarClan, not truly." He leaned over to whisper in her ear, his breath like a chill. "Your sins are too many and you've walked the path of darkness too long."

Her heart tightened in her chest and her breath quickened. Could he be right? Did StarClan only speak with her because they also had something to gain? Were they just like the Dark Forest, dressed up in starlight to ease the mind?

"No one will truly accept you with the darkness that follows you." Wrath murmured softly. "Not like I will."

Hopeflame squeezed her eyes shut in an attempt to block him out. No, this had to be a trick! Bluestar had told her that she was StarClan's last hope. There were plenty of cats who loved her! She listed them in her mind to fortify herself against Wrath's manipulation:

Brambleclaw, Sandstorm, Graystripe, Owlgaze, Mapleheart, Stormblaze, Featherstream...

"They don't really *care for you, Hopeflame," Wrath whispered in her ear.*

Hopeflame could see the shadows circling her at Wrath's command. They reminded her of wolves hunting down their prey. She tried to hold on to those she loved in her heart, to block out the shadows. But no matter how hard she tried, the shadows drew closer and closer.

"No!" Hopeflame cried to herself. "I am loved!"

"It's all a lie..." Wrath's voice surrounded her like the wind. "No one

loves you..."

The shadows were at her paws now, draining all warmth from her body. She collapsed on the forest floor, grief and guilt overwhelming her. "I did this..." She cried to herself. "I betrayed the clans." Her cries turned into sobs. "I betrayed them all!"

Coldness moved up her limbs, encircled her torso, and made its way to her heart. Guilt consumed her. Hopeflame sobbed as she lost all hope of fighting off the darkness. What would happen to her when she woke? Would she wake?

"Hopeflame!!"

Her eyes snapped open when she heard the cry. It wasn't Wrath. It was someone else.

Streaking towards her from the shadows at the tree-line was a blur. Only as it neared could she make out who it was. Her heart leaped in her chest.

Graystripe crouched down in front of her so that they were eye level. "Fight it, Hopeflame!" He growled. "Don't let the darkness consume you!"

"But I've too many sins for any cat to love me!" Hopeflame cried.

Graystripe shook his head determinedly. "No, that's a lie." He touched his nose to hers, spreading warmth through her once more. "You are deeply loved, Hopeflame. You're my daughter. There is nothing that you could do that would ever take that away."

Hopeflame held his gaze and saw nothing but love there. He had to be telling the truth. Graystripe really did love her despite all of her wrongdoings. Warmth spread throughout her body, driving back the shadows.

"No!" Wrath screeched. "He's lying! Only I can accept you for who you are!"

Hopeflame pulled herself to her paws to stand tall with Graystripe. "No, you're wrong. I know he's not lying because I know how I feel about my unborn kits." She rested her tail on her swollen abdomen. "I would do

anything for them."

"And they'll turn on you, too!" Wrath spat angrily. "If you walk away then you'll live the rest of your life in emptiness!"

Hopeflame drew back her lips to show her fangs. "You're the liar here."

She suddenly convulsed in extreme pain. It took her very breath away. She gasped.

Graystripe rubbed his cheek against hers. "It's time."

~*~

Hopeflame woke back in the TigerClan nursery but the pain didn't go away, it just grew stronger. She yowled and curled up in pain. This pain was worse than anything she'd felt before. It wracked through her whole body like waves.

Featherstream appeared at her side. "It'll be okay, Hopeflame. Your kits are on their way."

"I'll go fetch Mapleheart!" Ferncloud mewed before dashing off.

"Focus on breathing," Featherstream ordered. She positioned herself at Hopeflame's head and began licking her forehead. "You're doing just fine."

Brambleclaw burst through the lichen screen with Mapleheart, Sandstorm, and Ferncloud on his heels. "Where is she?!"

"Over here," Featherstream replied, waving him over. She rose to her paws. "I'll be outside if you need me." Ferncloud and Featherstream gathered their kits before heading into the clearing.

Brambleclaw moved by Hopeflame's head and licked her ears. "I'm here, Hopeflame."

Sandstorm settled on the other side of her head. "You're doing wonderful, Hopeflame."

Mapleheart offered Hopeflame a bit of soaked moss. "Drink, it'll give

you strength."

Hopeflame obeyed, lapping gratefully at the moss. She was interrupted as another wave of pain coursed through her abdomen. Her body convulsed with the pain. It terrified her and she felt like she'd be split in two.

Brambleclaw and Sandstorm continued encouraging her, but nothing could ease her pain. She cried out into the night air. How could anything hurt so much? Is this how Sandstorm felt kitting her and her littermates?

Mapleheart laid a paw on her belly and waited. She gave a nod. "Everything's happening as it should. Your first kit should be here soon."

She did not lie. Within minutes, the first kit was born. Mapleheart nipped the sac and began licking it. She settled the dark ginger kit in the curve of Hopeflame's belly. "It's a tom."

Brambleclaw sighed gratefully. "Hear that, Hopeflame? The first one's a tom!"

Hopeflame couldn't concentrate on his words because a new wave of pain arrived. Another kit was born. "A she-kit!" Mapleheart announced.

This time Hopeflame managed to lift her head to look upon her kits. This one had a flame-colored pelt. She looked upon both of them with unwavering love. Brambleclaw nuzzled her gently.

More pain indicated the arrival of a third kit. Hopeflame yowled as both Brambleclaw and Sandstorm comforted her. "Another tom!" Mapleheart purred as she settled him next to his littermates.

Hopeflame didn't have the opportunity to look upon her third-born because the pains came once more. She cried and Brambleclaw licked her forehead. Would it never end?

The last kit was born and miraculously, the pain ebbed away. She didn't hear the last kit cry like the first three had so she lifted her head nervously. "Mapleheart? What's wrong with it?"

Hopeflame saw Mapleheart rubbing her paws furiously against the pale ginger kit. Everyone in the nursery held their breath. Worry constricted Hopeflame's heart. Did her fourth kit not make it? Was this her punishment for all she's done?

Then, the kit let out a soft squeak and Hopeflame released a sigh of relief. Mapleheart looked up at her with pride glowing in her eyes. "You have another she-kit." Her sister placed the tiny kit alongside the other three.

Hopeflame was exhausted.

"We have two sons and two daughters," Brambleclaw purred as he nuzzled her. "You did so well; I'm so proud of you."

Sandstorm offered Hopeflame more soaked moss which she was grateful for. The pale ginger she-cat caressed her daughter's face with her paw. "I'm proud of you, too." Hopeflame purred in her mother's embrace.

She lifted her head to look upon her kits. The first one was a dark ginger tom with a white-tipped tail. The second was a flame-colored she-kit who looked strong. The third was a dark brown tom with a white underbelly and paws. And the last was a pale ginger she-kit that looked a lot like Sandstorm.

Mapleheart offered her a few herbs then left the den with Sandstorm to give them some privacy. Hopeflame couldn't tear her eyes away from her kits, they were so beautiful. Brambleclaw stayed at her side, purring the entire time. The last moon of arguing suddenly seemed so stupid.

"Have you thought of names?" Brambleclaw asked softly.

She shook her head. "No, I have no idea." Numerous names ran through her mind, but none of them seemed to fit. "Any ideas?"

Brambleclaw looked upon them wistfully. "There's exactly four of them."

Hopeflame frowned in confusion. "Yes, but what does that have to do with naming them?"

"There are four oaks at Fourtrees." Brambleclaw mewed. "Just as TigerClan was born of four clans."

Surprise ruffled Hopeflame's pelt. "You want to name them in honor of the four clans?"

Brambleclaw bowed his head sheepishly. "You think it's a terrible idea?"

Hopeflame purred, licking his cheek. "I think it's a wonderful way to honor the old clans." She looked upon her kits with new meaning. "The dark ginger tom can be Thunderkit." She remembered when she met ThunderClan's founder during her trip to the Moonstone.

"The dark tabby tom can be Shadowkit." Brambleclaw decided.

Hopeflame nodded in agreement. "The flame-colored she-kit can be Riverkit." Memories of her time in RiverClan swam in her eyes.

"Windkit will be our pale ginger she-kit." Brambleclaw finished, fluffing up proudly.

Their names were perfect, honoring each of the fallen clans. Hopeflame's heart was so filled with love that she thought she would burst. She gazed at her kits with pride. "Welcome to TigerClan," She murmured softly so only they could hear. "I know that you'll bring us honor worthy of StarClan."

~*~

A/N
As always, thank you for your patience. Adult life keeps me busy as well as my manuscript for a series I'd like to publish one day.

Allegiances Updated

Key
[T] Previously ThunderClan
[S] Previously ShadowClan
[R] Previously RiverClan
[W] Previously WindClan

TigerClan
Leader-Tigerstar: large, dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes and unusually sharp claws [T]
Deputy-Brambleclaw: dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes [T]
Advisors-
-Whitestorm: big white tom [T]
-Blackfoot: white tom with black paws [S]
-Leopardfur: unusually golden spotted she-cat [R]
-Mudclaw: mottled dark brown tom [W]
Healers-
-Barkface: short-tailed brown tom [W]
-Mudfur: long-haired light brown tabby tom [R]
-Cinderpelt: dark gray she-cat [T]
-Runningnose: small gray and white tom [S]
-Mapleheart: ginger and white she-cat [T]
Warriors-
-Goldenflower: pale ginger she-cat [T]
-Webfoot: dark gray tabby tom [W]
-Tawnyfur: golden brown she-cat [W]
-Tornear: tabby tom [W]
-Tallpoppy: long-legged, light brown tabby she-cat [S]
-Fawnstep: ginger she-cat with white flecks [S]
-Mistyfoot: dark gray she-cat [R]
-Longtail: pale tabby tom with dark stripes [T]
-Mosspelt: tortoiseshell she-cat [R]
-Breezetail: cream-colored she-cat with blue eyes [W]
-Jaggedtooth: huge tabby tom [S]
-Dawncloud: small tabby she-cat [S]
-Runningwind: swift tabby tom [T]

-Mousefur: small dusky brown she-cat [T]
-Littlecloud: very small tabby tom [S]
-Russetfur: dark ginger she-cat [S]
-Onewhisker: light brown tabby tom [W]
-Darkflower: black she-cat [S]
-Whitethroat: black tom with white chest and paws [S]
-Brindleface: pretty tabby she-cat [T]
-Whitetail: small white she-cat [W]
-Sandstorm: pale ginger she-cat with green eyes [T]
-Runningbrook: light gray she-cat [W]
-Dustpelt: dark brown tabby tom [T]
-Petalnose: tortoiseshell she-cat [S]
-Gorsefur: long-legged brown tabby tom [W]
-Swiftwind: black and white tom [T]
-Briarnose: long-haired tortoiseshell she-cat [R]
-Thornclaw: golden-brown tabby tom [T]
-Brackenfur: golden-brown tabby tom [T]
-Brightflower: white she-cat with ginger patches [T]
-Ashfang: pale gray tom with darker flecks and dark blue eyes [T]
-Rainwhisker: black tom [T]
-Sorreltail: tortoiseshell and white she-cat [T]
-Rowanclaw: ginger tabby tom [S]
-Owlgaze: light brown tabby tom with green eyes [T]
-Freeleap: long-haired gray tom with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes, former loner
-Crowfeather: black tom with blue eyes [W]
-Skybreeze: blue-grey she-cat with blue eyes [W]
-Cloudpool: white tom [W]
-Ravenflight: black tom [S]
-Cloverpetal: black and white she-cat with green eyes [S]
-Hollytail: light gray and white tabby she-cat [S]
-Eagleswoop dark brown tabby tom with a white-tipped tail & white face [W]
-Soarwing: black and white she-cat with blue eyes [W]
-Hailfrost: blue-grey tom with amber eyes [R]
-Dewcloud: dark gray she-cat with white flecks and amber eyes [R]
-Turtlestripe: brown tom with golden-swirled stripes [R]
-Shimmersong: pale gray she-cat with green eyes [R]

Apprentices-

-Ebonypaw: pure black tom (mentor: Owlgaze)

-Smallpaw: very small tabby she-cat with white paws (mentor: Sorreltail)
-Pinepaw: russet tabby tom (mentor: Brambleclaw)
-Heatherpaw: dusky brown she-cat (mentor: Tawnypelt) [W]
-Larkpaw: light brown tabby she-cat (mentor: Cloudpool) [W]
-Lilacpaw: gray she-cat with brown points (mentor: Russetfur) [W]
-Gingerpaw: ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes (mentor: Sandstorm)
-Beepaw: pale ginger tom with black stripes (mentor: Jaggedtooth)
-Spottedpaw: tortoiseshell she-cat (mentor: Mapleheart)
-Leafpaw: black and white tom (mentor: Ashfang)
-Smokepaw: smoky black tabby tom (mentor: Thornclaw)

Queens-

-Ferncloud: pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and pale green eyes (mother to Dustpelt's kits: Spiderkit and Shrewkit) [T]
-Featherstream: long-haired silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes (mother to Owlgaze's kits: Silverkit and Stormkit) [R]
-Tawnypelt: tortoiseshell she-cat (expecting Rowanclaw's kits) [T]
-Hopeflame: long-haired russet she-cat with a dark dorsal stripe and green eyes (mother to Brambleclaw's kits: Thunderkit, Riverkit, Shadowkit, and Windkit) [T]

Kits-

-Spiderkit: lithe black tom with brown underbelly (mother: Ferncloud)
-Shrewkit: small dark brown tom with amber eyes (mother: Ferncloud)
-Silverkit: long-furred silver tabby she-kit with green eyes (mother: Featherstream)
-Stormkit: light brown tabby tom with a white face and belly (mother: Featherstream)
-Thunderkit: dark ginger tom with a white-tipped tail (mother: Hopeflame)
-Riverkit: flame-colored she-kit with green eyes (mother: Hopeflame)
-Shadowkit: dark brown tabby and white tom (mother: Hopeflame)
-Windkit: pale ginger she-kit with yellow eyes (mother: Hopeflame)

Cats Outside the Clans

-Barley: black and white tom
-Butterfly: golden tabby she-cat

-Rosie: tortoiseshell and white she-cat
-Sunny: golden tabby tom
-Oliver: pale gray tabby tom
-Maisie: black she-cat with white paws
-Luna: silver tabby she-cat
-Hawk: brown tabby tom
-Shadow: black tom with white chest
-Lion: golden tabby tom

Chapter 11

"They're so strong," Tawnypelt purred as she gazed upon Hopeflame's kits. "I can't wait until mine are born." She brightened. "Our kits will be kin!"

Hopeflame looked at Tawnypelt affectionately. Brambleclaw's sister had only moved into the nursery half a moon ago. It would be a while before her kits were born. Still, it was nice to have more company. The nursery was starting to feel full with Ferncloud, Featherstream, Tawnypelt, herself, and three litters of kits. TigerClan was thriving.

"Tigerstar wasn't too thrilled with our kits' names." Hopeflame mewed with a smirk. "He argued with Brambleclaw all night about changing their names. He didn't budge."

Featherstream rolled her eyes. "Well, we can't have any cat remembering or honoring the old clans." She replied sarcastically.

"No," Hopeflame chuckled. "We can't have that at all."

"I can't wait until mine are apprentices," Ferncloud groaned. Spiderkit and Shrewkit were outside playing where she could still see them. "They're getting too rowdy for the nursery."

Silverkit and Stormkit were busy watching Hopeflame's kits with curiosity. "When can we play with them?" Stormkit squeaked.

Silverkit rolled her eyes at her brother. "They're only a few days old." She reminded him impatiently. "They haven't even opened their eyes yet!"

Hopeflame purred with amusement at her half-sister's kits. "It'll be at least a moon before they can play."

"We're two moons old," Stormkit stated proudly as he puffed out his chest.

"I can't wait until we're apprentices," Silverkit sighed dreamily.

Hopeflame shared a look with Featherstream. According to the Code of TigerClan, kits were made apprentices at four moons old rather than six. Now that she had kits of her own, Hopeflame was even more disgusted by the practice. Four moons seemed much to young to be an apprentice.

A yowl outside signaled that Tigerstar was calling a clan meeting. Everyone got up to join them, but Hopeflame hesitated. She wasn't ready to leave her kits for much amount of time. What if they got hungry or scared?

"You could sit in the entrance," Ferncloud suggested. "That's what I did when mine were newborns."

Hopeflame blinked at her gratefully. She moved to sit in the nursery entrance where she could see everything happening but also keep an eye on her kits. The clan gathered around the Great Rock where Tigerstar waited patiently. What could he possibly want?

"Cats of TigerClan," Tigerstar yowled loud enough even for her to hear. "We have grown much since the Merges and TigerClan is unified. Today, one cat must earn his warrior name. His being here is a symbol of my generosity."

Tigerstar motioned a cat forward and Hopeflame's heart skipped a beat when she saw that it was Free. The clan backed and created space for the dreaded warrior assessment. Free stood at the center, the sun gleaming off of his dark gray pelt. His resemblance to Graystripe was uncanny.

"Free, you will be fighting my son and trusted deputy, Brambleclaw." Tigerstar nodded to Brambleclaw who stepped to join Free in the center. "Prove yourself worthy and you will receive your warrior name."

Free narrowed his eyes at Brambleclaw. Before Tigerstar gave the word, Free lunged for the dark brown tabby tom with surprising ferocity. Hopeflame gasped; she hated watching her brother fight against her mate. The two became a clawing, writhing mess of fur

and blood.

Brambleclaw tried to pin Free, but the gray tom moved swiftly to avoid him. He tripped Brambleclaw in the process, preparing to claw him across the belly. Brambleclaw kicked out at Free with his hind legs and the gray tom went flying.

Free landed in the dirt with a thud but didn't stay down long. The two toms circled each other, snarling. Brambleclaw lunged at Free, but he was ready for him. In one swift movement that took everyone by surprise, Free leaped straight over Brambleclaw. In one heartbeat, he spun and tripped Brambleclaw from behind.

Somehow, Free managed to pin Brambleclaw beneath his sharp claws. The clan held their breath. Hopeflame prayed to StarClan that Free would hold his temper and not seriously injure Brambleclaw. She sighed with relief when Free released him and backed away respectfully.

Tigerstar jumped down from the Great Rock to stand in between Free and Brambleclaw. He faced the dark gray tom with a new appreciation in his gaze. The clan watched with bated breath, wondering what Tigerstar would say.

"Free," Tigerstar began, "You've come a long way. Clan-born but raised by loners, it's taken you longer than most to reach your warrior assessment. And so I ask you: Free, do you promise to uphold the Code of TigerClan, to fight until the death to protect this clan, and to draw blood like a warrior?"

For the longest time, Free didn't say anything. His gaze searched the clan, looking for someone. Then, his green eyes settled on her. They held each other's stare, and Hopeflame saw questions hidden there. He looked so unsure.

Hopeflame gave him a reassuring nod, remembering their conversation when she'd pleaded for his freedom. He had expressed his disinterest in being part of a clan with no honor. She had promised that things would change one day. She still trusted that was true.

Free's gaze softened at her. He faced Tigerstar with a new confidence. "I do."

Tigerstar stood taller. "Then, from this moment on, your name will be Freeleap. You are no longer a loner, but a full warrior of TigerClan."

The clan started cheering his new name: "Freeleap! Freeleap!"

Hopeflame cheered loudest of all.

Freeleap broke away from the clan and padded towards her. He paused before rubbing his cheek against hers. "I hope that you still trust TigerClan can be honorable."

Hopeflame nodded with a purr. Her eyes found Brambleclaw among her clanmates. For all his faults, she trusted him. He would make an honorable leader.

"I do."

Chapter 12

"Be quiet, Riverkit! We don't want to wake her!"

Hopeflame stirred in her nest in the nursery at the sound of Shadowkit's voice. She slowly opened one eye just enough to glimpse her four kits sneaking towards the entrance. As usual, Riverkit was in the lead, her tail fluffed out in excitement.

Thunderkit glanced nervously over his shoulder back at her and she quickly pretended to be asleep again. "What if Mother gets angry when she realizes we snuck out?"

Oh, my sweet Thunderkit, Hopeflame thought to herself with a purr.

Windkit followed his gaze back to her. "We're only going outside." She reasoned out loud. "It's not like we're sneaking out of camp."

"Come on!" Riverkit squealed excitedly.

Hopeflame decided that now was the time to let her kits know she was awake. She stretched out her forelegs and yawned dramatically. Her kits each jumped in surprise then hurried away from the entrance. Hopeflame attempted to withhold her amusement.

"Good morning, kits," Hopeflame purred.

They each murmured their responses. She looked down at each of them quizzically. It was hard for her to believe that they were nearly a moon old. She could remember clearly the day they opened their eyes or their first time out of the nursery. Soon she'd blink and they'd be apprentices.

Shadowkit stepped forward, lifting his green eyes to her. "Mother, can we go outside the den? We promise that we'll stay together and we won't get under any cat's paws."

Riverkit bounced excitedly. "We promise! Please!" Her green eyes

gleamed.

Hopeflame thought back to when she and her littermates were kits. Sandstorm almost always let them explore the camp whenever they asked. "It's okay with me, but one claw out of line and you're back in the nursery."

The kits bounded out of the nursery and debated which game they would play. Hopeflame followed them, stepping into the weak leaf-bare sun. She noticed her kits racing to join Silverkit and Stormkit in their game of moss-ball. Featherstream lay nearby with a half-eaten trout in front of her.

Hopeflame padded to join her half-sister. She greeted her with a soft *mrrow* and touched noses with her. Their kits tumbled and played nicely together. Silverkit and Stormkit were only about a moon older than them.

"They're getting so big," Hopeflame bemused.

Featherstream sighed, stretching out her forelegs. "Before we know it they'll be warriors and having kits of their own!"

Hopeflame huffed in disbelief. "Mine are only a moon old."

Her green eyes took a moment to survey the camp. Tawnyfur shared tongues with Goldenflower, Owlgaze and Ebonypaw were returning from a hunt, and Whitetail led a patrol out of camp. It almost seemed peaceful in camp. There hadn't been an argument or fight between clanmates in a quarter moon. Maybe TigerClan would be unified from now on.

A horrible thought robbed all the peace from Hopeflame's mind: what about what StarClan was asking her to do? Her eyes landed on every cat who'd been born since Tigerstar killed Bluestar and Fireheart. Would any of them exist in the alternate reality? Those of half-clan birth certainly wouldn't.

She banished the thought. Right now, life was good and she wanted to focus on raising her kits. She didn't want to spend all her time daydreaming about what might or might not be.

Brambleclaw appeared at the camp entrance with his apprentice, Pinepaw, on his tail. With them were Thornclaw, Runningbrook, and Smokepaw. He brightened as soon as he noticed their kits playing in the camp clearing. The dark brown tabby tom said something to Pinepaw and the rest of the patrol before padding over to the kits.

Hopeflame couldn't hear what he said to them, but they immediately began attacking him with excited yowls. Her heart warmed at the sight of her mate playing with their kits. Not every tom was as active a father as Brambleclaw. She was grateful to him.

Movement under the Great Rock caught her attention as Tigerstar emerged from his den. The large tom's pelt gleamed in the sunlight. He leaped onto the Great Rock and yowled for the clan to gather.

She got to her paws and called her kits to her side. They reluctantly joined her, Featherstream, and her half-sister's kits to watch the meeting. Tawnypelt appeared from the nursery, round and slow, to sit at Hopeflame's other side.

"I can't wait until these kits are born," Tawnypelt muttered to her.

Hopeflame didn't have time to respond before Tigerstar began speaking. "Cats of TigerClan, it is time for two kits to be made apprentices." He beckoned Spiderkit and Shrewkit forward. She remembered momentarily their dead littermates: Hollykit and Larchkit.

Tigerstar jumped down from the Great Rock to stand in front of Spiderkit. The young black and brown tom stood a little taller. "Spiderkit, until you draw blood like a warrior, your name will be Spiderpaw. Your mentor will be Hailfrost."

The clan called his new name eagerly: "Spiderpaw! Spiderpaw!"

Tigerstar moved on to Shrewkit. "Shrewkit, until you draw blood like a warrior, you will be known as Shrewpaw. Hollytail will mentor you."

"Shrewpaw! Shrewpaw!"

The clan broke apart, some going to congratulate the new apprentices. Hopeflame tried to ignore the pang in her heart. She hadn't been able to continue Ebonypaw's training because she'd had to move into the nursery. Someday, she hoped to have the opportunity to fully train another apprentice.

"Mother?" Windkit looked up at her with round, yellow eyes. "Can we continue playing with Silverkit and Stormkit?" The rest of her kits looked on.

Hopeflame nodded, "Yes, but soon it'll be time for your nap."

"Thank you!" They all chorused before running off to join the older kits.

Brambleclaw approached her, rubbing his cheek against hers. "The forest is starting to warm. It'll be new-leaf soon."

Hopeflame purred. "The kits will be apprentices by then."

"Just in time for you to join me on patrols again." Brambleclaw pointed out. "Tigerstar said when it's time for them to be named apprentices, he'll ask for my input."

She snorted and rolled her eyes. "I'm sure he doesn't want his kin to be trained by just any cat."

Brambleclaw's pelt bristled. "I'm sure he just wants to make sure our kits get the best possible training. He'll do the same for Tawnypelt's kits."

Hopeflame's gaze wandered to where Tawnypelt shared tongues with Rowanclaw, her mate. "I just hope our kits are mentored by good, honorable cats."

"I wouldn't let it be any other way." Brambleclaw assured her.

She stretched her claws out as she thought. Tigerstar's idea of honorable certainly wasn't the same. If she could choose the mentors for her kits, she'd probably choose cats like Whitestorm or Mistyfoot.

Brambleclaw nosed her shoulder. "That's three moons away. We don't need to worry too much yet."

He was right, the reasonable, level-headed tom as always. Still, Hopeflame couldn't shake off her anxiety. What if Blackfoot or Jaggedtooth were named mentors to any of her kits? They would be the last cats she'd want to train them.

Chapter 13

Hopeflame crouched at the edge of the clearing, sharing a mouse with Mapleheart. Her kits played nearby with Silverkit and Stormkit. Featherstream sat near the nursery entrance watching them carefully.

"The kits are growing stronger," Mapleheart noted, eyeing the kits lovingly. "It's great that they're close in age with Silverkit and Stormkit."

She brightened at her sister's praise. They were getting stronger and more adventurous every day. It was a full-time job to keep them from wandering out of camp. Riverkit and Shadowkit especially tried to tag after every patrol, but Thunderkit and Windkit were more content to observe.

"How's Spottedpaw's training coming along?" Hopeflame asked her sister. Spottedpaw was one of Brightflower and Swiftwind's kits. She'd started training to be a healer with Mapleheart soon after the Merge with WindClan.

Mapleheart's amber eyes shimmered with excitement. "She's so bright! Spottedpaw has a real instinct for healing and she's so compassionate with all her patients. She was very helpful while delivering Tawnypelt's three kits."

Hopeflame was happy to see Mapleheart settling into her life as a healer. Once upon a time, she'd worried a lot about her sickly sister's future in the clan. But now, Mapleheart was a talented healer training an apprentice.

"I'm so proud of you, Mapleheart." Hopeflame purred.

Mapleheart gave her chest fur a few embarrassed licks. She suddenly sat straighter, her eyes focused on something. Hopeflame glanced over her shoulder to see Rainwhisker setting prey on the fresh-kill pile. The realization came over her like a ray of sunshine:

Mapleheart liked Rainwhisker.

Hopeflame gave Mapleheart a playful nudge. "Rainwhisker's a nice, sensible tom."

Before Mapleheart could respond, Lilacpaw raced into camp, her tail fluffed out in fear. "Help! Ebonypaw fell out of a tree and he's not moving!"

Hopeflame jumped to her paws, her fur bristling at the news. Ebonypaw had been her apprentice! She and Mapleheart crossed the clearing to meet Lilacpaw. The young apprentice seemed frantic.

"Where did this happen?" Hopeflame asked Lilacpaw in as calm a voice as she could manage. By this time, more of the clan had gathered around.

"He climbed a tree by Snackrocks," Lilacpaw responded as she tried to catch her breath. "He was trying to catch a squirrel but the branch broke and he fell..."

Tigerstar pushed through the crowd of cats. "Lead the way to him, Lilacpaw."

Hopeflame frantically searched for her kits and saw them with Featherstream. Her half-sister met her gaze and gave her a reassuring nod. She'd known was she was asking without a word needing to be said.

"I'll join you," Hopeflame volunteered. She needed to be sure that Ebonypaw was okay.

Mapleheart stepped forward at her side. "You'll need a healer."

Tigerstar nodded to each of them. "Very well." He surveyed the camp with his amber eyes. "Longtail, both Runnindwind and Darkflower went on a patrol along the Wind Border. Fetch them and tell them what happened." With that said, the leader signaled Lilacpaw to lead them.

Lilacpaw turned tail and ran out of camp with Hopeflame and the

others on her tail. The young apprentice, born of WindClan, was extremely fast. She'd be even quicker if she didn't have to slow down to dodge trees and undergrowth. Hopeflame kept up with the group, but barely. It's easily been two moons since she's gotten any good exercise.

They kept a steady pace through the forest, swerving around trees and undergrowth. Hopeflame tried not to imagine the worst. Perhaps Ebonypaw just had a sprained leg or a dislocated shoulder? They wouldn't know until they got there and Mapleheart's had a chance to look him over.

Soon, she could see Owlgaze, Whitestorm, and Russetfur gathered around a black lump of fur on the forest floor. As they neared, she realized with dread that Ebonypaw was not moving. He did lift his head upon their arrival which sparked some hope in Hopeflame's chest.

Mapleheart immediately went to his side. She evaluated his eyes, his body for any visible wounds. Tigerstar walked up more slowly, taking in the scene carefully. Hopeflame moved by Ebonypaw's head to offer any comfort.

"Hopeflame?" Ebonypaw wheezed.

She touched her nose to his forehead. "It'll be okay, Ebonypaw. Mapleheart will make you all better."

Hopeflame noticed Mapleheart running her claw gently down his spine. She started at his shoulders and he flinched. As she went down his back, he continued flinching against her touch. Then she reached the base of his tail and Ebonypaw didn't flinch. He didn't even seem to notice that Mapleheart's claw was prodding him.

"I told him not to climb the tree," Owlgaze was telling Tigerstar. "He wouldn't listen! Before I know it, he's falling from the tree..."

A part of Hopeflame wanted to blame Owlgaze, but deep down she knew it wasn't his fault. Sometimes apprentices, especially as they neared their warrior assessment, liked to think they knew better than their mentors. Ebonypaw may have not listened to her either.

Mapleheart's face was stoic. She beckoned Tigerstar to her and spoke to him under her breath. All Hopeflame heard her say was 'paralyzed'.

Realization filled Tigerstar's face. "Are you sure?" He asked.

Mapleheart padded up to Ebonypaw. She prodded her claw at the base of his tail. "Can you feel that, Ebonypaw?" Her voice was calm, careful, measured.

He shook his head weakly. "No."

"What about that?" Mapleheart moved her claw along each of his hind legs. He replied with another shake of his head. She gave Tigerstar a look.

"Whats wrong with me?" Ebonypaw murmured shakily. His amber eyes widened in fear.

"You're paralyzed," Mapleheart explained slowly. "You'll never walk properly again."

Hopeflame touched her nose to his forehead. "But your whole clan will support you," She promised him. "You'll get through this."

Tigerstar stepped forward, the shadows crawling across his broad shoulders. "Don't make promises you can't keep, Hopeflame."

Without another word, Tigerstar raked his claws against Ebonypaw's throat. Hopeflame gasped, her heart twisting in her chest. Owlgaze stood frozen and Russetfur tried to shield Lilacpaw's eyes.

Blood flowed from Ebonypaw's throat like a river, staining the forest floor.

Chapter 14

"How could you?!" Whitestorm hissed with rage burning in his eyes.

Hopeflame licked Ebonypaw's forehead in an attempt to comfort him as the life drained from his body. Tears trailed down her cheeks but she tried to ignore her own pain. Her former apprentice was dying at her paws. Owlgaze joined her, his head hung in misery. Ebonypaw tried to speak, but no words came out.

"Shh..." Hopeflame murmured, touching her nose to his cheek. "StarClan's waiting for you."

The light in his amber eyes faded forever. He was gone.

"He was just an apprentice!" Whitestorm shouted.

Tigerstar flashed his fangs at Whitestorm with a snarl. "He was useless! TigerClan can only have strong, loyal warriors!"

"So you just killed him?" Mapleheart breathed, her voice shaking. Hopeflame moved to brush pelts with her sister to offer comfort.

Whitestorm launched himself at Tigerstar, claws unsheathed. They collided like thunder and Whitestorm clawed at Tigerstar with ferocious fury. Tigerstar swiped at Whitestorm with his abnormally long claws. Blood splattered the forest floor to mingle with the blood of Ebonypaw.

Russetfur tried to shield her apprentice's eyes from what was happening. Lilacpaw was shaking in her fur. Owlgaze stuck close to Hopeflame and Mapleheart, the pain from losing Ebonypaw evident on his face. He almost seemed numb to the fight between the two toms.

Tigerstar tried to pin Whitestorm beneath his thorn-sharp claws, but the white tom slipped from his grasp. He spun around to hit Tigerstar's tendons. The clan leader stumbled which gave

Whitestorm just enough time to leap onto his shoulders. Blood spurted from the wound and Tigerstar released a furious yowl.

The white tom hung on tightly, digging his claws in further. He seemed to be preparing to bite Tigerstar's throat. Hopeflame leaped to her paws and she was moving before she knew what happened. She threw herself at Whitestorm, knocking him off of Tigerstar's back.

"Stop fighting!" Hopeflame hissed angrily.

Whitestorm stared at her in shock, his jaw agape. Before he could say a word, Tigerstar pounced on him as if he were a mouse and locked his fangs around his throat. Blood gushed from Whitestorm's throat and Hopeflame gasped in shock.

When Tigerstar finally released Whitestorm, the white tom was completely limp. He thudded to the ground as lifeless as fresh-kill with his eyes staring blankly up at Starpelt. Hopeflame couldn't move; her gaze locked on him.

What had she done?

She'd only wanted to stop Whitestorm from killing Tigerstar. This wasn't supposed to happen! As much as she hated Tigerstar right now, he was Brambleclaw's father. How could she have looked Brambleclaw in the eye and told him that she'd watched his father die without trying to save him? He'd never forgive her.

Mapleheart approached him on shaky legs to hold a paw in front of his nose. A few heartbeats passed before she pulled away with a distraught expression. "He's dead."

"Owlgaze, Hopeflame, carry Whitestorm back to camp. I want the entire clan to bear witness to his treachery. Russetfur, Lilacpaw, carry Ebonypaw." Tigerstar ordered then slunk off in the direction of Fourtrees.

Hopeflame shook with anger. Two honorable cats died today because of Tigerstar. His actions betrayed the emptiness in his heart. How could any cat like that love anyone? How could he be a

clan leader who actually cared for his clan?

A touch at her shoulder pulled her from her thoughts. Owlgaze stood at her side with sadness painting his face. "Let's take Whitestorm home."

~*~

Hopeflame and Owlgaze carried Whitestorm into camp with Russetfur and Lilacpaw supporting Ebonypaw. The clan gathered around, cries of shock and despair filling the camp. Darkflower, who had been sobbing into Runningwind's shoulders, ran over when she caught sight of her son's lifeless body.

Russetfur and Lilacpaw laid the black apprentice beside Whitestorm at the foot of the Great Rock. Tigerstar sat atop the Great Rock, his amber eyes hard. Whispering filled Fourtrees as the clan speculated what had happened. Whitestorm's mate, Brindleface, along with their kits, Ashfang and Ferncloud, surrounded his body. Sorreltail and her brothers joined them-he'd been their father as well.

"Ebonypaw suffered a cruel end," Tigerstar's voice echoed through Fourtrees. He sounded desolate, but Hopeflame knew better. "After falling from a tree, he'd become paralyzed. I put him out of a lifetime of misery."

Hopeflame's claws dug into the dirt. Brambleclaw appeared from the crowd to brush his pelt against hers in comfort. She leaned into him for support. Later she'd tell him how his father mercilessly killed Ebonypaw then Whitestorm.

Tigerstar turned his gaze to Whitestorm's body. "This traitor attacked me. If it weren't for Hopeflame, I may not be standing here before you."

Murmurs of surprise and howls of protest filled Fourtrees. Many cats seemed discontent with Tigerstar's version of events. Hopeflame searched the camp for her kits but noticed Featherstream sitting at the entrance to the nursery. She gave a reassuring nod.

Tigerstar continued, shooting a deathly glare to any cat that spoke out. "Ebonypaw will receive a vigil and warrior's burial at sunrise." He sneered towards Whitestorm, hatred burning in his amber eyes. "The traitor will be left on the moor for the buzzards to eat. Traitors do not receive honorable burials."

"With all due respect, Tigerstar," Barkface stood to bowls address the leader, "Don't his kin deserve closure?"

The large tabby tom narrowed his eyes at Barkface. "His kin should understand that he tried to murder their leader. If their loyalty lies with TigerClan, then they will see what is right." He raised his head to address the whole clan. "Leopardfur, Jaggedtooth, and Dustpelt, I'd like you three to bring this traitor's body out to the moor. Leave him in the open to rot. Let this be a warning to any cat who proves to be disloyal."

The three warriors moved to carry away Whitestorm's body while Brindleface begged them to let him be. Ferncloud had to comfort her and pull her away from his body. Hopeflame's heart twisted in her chest. How could Tigerstar be so cruel?

Meanwhile, Runningnose and Mudfur prepared Ebonypaw's body for vigil. They cleaned his pelt and positioned him so that he almost looked like he was asleep. Herbs like rosemary were used to ward off the smell of death. Cats gathered around as the sun began to set.

Brambleclaw brushed his cheek against hers. "Are you okay?"

Hopeflame tried to ignore the sickness gurgling in her stomach. The events of today made her want to curl up in her nest and pray that this was all a terrible nightmare. What was she supposed to say to him? No, she wasn't okay. Her apprentice was dead and Whitestorm died trying to avenge him. His death was on her paws.

"I'm going to put the kits to sleep then come sit vigil." She got up to do just that, but Brambleclaw stopped her.

"Let me worry about the kits." He whispered gently in her ear. "You sit vigil."

Hopeflame blinked gratefully at him before joining the cats sitting vigil. She sat between Owlgaze and Thornclaw. Guilt prickled her pelt because she knew in her heart that Whitestorm should be here. It sickened her even more to think of his body being picked over like crow-food.

She spent the rest of the night remembering both Ebonypaw and Whitestorm with a heaviness in her heart.

Chapter 15

In the days that followed, something changed in Tigerstar. Whatever it was, it made Hopeflame uneasy. He was more irritable and paced around the camp in an almost paranoid manner. She made sure to steer clear of him and keep her kits far away.

That was proving more difficult as the days went on. They were growing more bold, often trying to sneak out of camp. It took her, Featherstream, Tawnypelt, and Sorreltail to keep all the kits in line. At least Talonkit, Daisykit, and Foxkit were still a bit too young to leave the nursery. Sorreltail just recently moved into the nursery expecting Gorsefur's kits.

Even now, Hopeflame bathed in the sun next to Featherstream and Sorreltail as they kept a close eye on the kits. Shadowkit and Riverkit tumbled in the snow with Stormkit while Windkit talked excitedly with Silverkit. Thunderkit had asked to visit the healer den.

She worried what Tigerstar or even Brambleclaw would say if they knew Thunderkit was showing interest in healing. There was still stigma around being a healer instead of a warrior. It's as if Tigerstar completely ignored how vital healers were to the health and safety of the clan. They saved lives, but Tigerstar only saw it as a soft profession.

Hopeflame doubted that Tigerstar would allow Thunderkit to become a healer.

"So, Sorreltail," Featherstream glanced at the tortoiseshell and white she-cat. "With you in the nursery, who's mentoring Smallpaw?"

It was a valid question. Onewhisker had taken over mentoring Heatherpaw when Tawnypelt joined the nursery.

Sorreltail looked over to where Smallpaw shared a mouse with Leafpaw. A flash of guilt passed across her face. "She'll be made a

warrior very soon. Until then, Owlgaze offered." She met Hopeflame's gaze and they shared a knowing look.

It's only been a few days since Ebonypaw's death and Owlgaze seemed to be taking it hard. He rarely spent any time in the camp and was constantly trying to keep himself busy. Hopeflame had tried talking to her brother, but he seemed inconsolable. She imagined that he'd offered to train Smallpaw because she was Ebonypaw's littermate.

Sudden squealing drew her attention to where Stormkit and Shadowkit tussled while Riverkit looked on.

"Pinned you!" Stormkit yowled triumphantly as he pinned Shadowkit beneath his paws.

Shadowkit squirmed. "No fair! You're bigger!"

The two kits began to bicker and Hopeflame sighed. "I've got this." She hauled herself to her paws and ambled over to the pair of young toms. "What's the matter?" She asked them.

"Stormkit pinned me and wouldn't let me up!" Shadowkit whined. His dark tabby pelt bristling with indignation.

Stormkit narrowed his eyes at his playmate. "We were practicing battle moves like real warriors! If I were a real warrior I'd claw you!"

Hopeflame shot Stormkit a warning look. "Well, you're not warriors yet, you're kits. Practicing battle moves is all well, but make sure you let him up once you've pinned him."

The light brown tabby tom lowered his head. "Yes, Hopeflame."

She gave them both an affectionate lick on the ear. "Now, when you're practicing battle moves, make sure that you're practicing your balance."

Riverkit bounced over to join them, excitement glittering in her green eyes. "Show us!" She begged.

Hopeflame's whiskers twitched in amusement at her daughter's antics. "Very well."

Before she could say anything else, Riverkit called out, "Windkit, Silverkit! Hopeflame's going to teach us some battle moves!"

The two she-kits raced over excitedly and Hopeflame realized she had their undivided attention. "One thing that a warrior cannot fight without is balance," She told them. "You'll need to practice that before you perform any extravagant battle moves."

Hopeflame reared onto her hind legs, balancing almost perfectly. She wobbled a little and realized her time in the nursery has made her a little soft. "See? It's all about control. Now you try."

Each of the kits tried balancing on their hind legs. Windkit stuck out her tongue in concentration, but she held the position longer than the others. Stormkit kept trying but tumbled within heartbeats. Riverkit and Silverkit did alright, and Shadowkit got the hang of it after a few tries.

"Good, Windkit," Hopeflame meowed proudly. "You too, Silverkit."

"Ugh, this is stupid!" Stormkit growled with frustration.

Hopeflame padded over to him. "Try again."

He reared on his hind legs and Hopeflame used her forepaws to steady him. "Focus on your core. That's your center of balance."

Stormkit concentrated hard and he soon was able to hold the position longer. "I did it!" He said with a lash of his tail.

Hopeflame spent the rest of the morning teaching the kits to balance. By the time they finished, each of the kits had improved significantly. She puffed her pelt out in pride at helping them accomplish such good balance for their age. Realization dawned on her and her shoulders slumped: she missed being a mentor.

She adored her kits and loved being a mother, but a part of her missed hunting and patrolling. She missed being a mentor. The forest called her and it was frustrating that she couldn't answer it.

Brambleclaw got to continue with his warrior and deputy duties!

Hopeflame stopped herself. No, it wasn't fair to be frustrated with Brambleclaw. Kits are what they both wanted. She knew what she was giving up when she became pregnant. Still, she couldn't fight the itch. Perhaps one of these days, the other queens could keep any eye on her kits while she joined a hunt.

As if on cue, Brambleclaw entered the camp with his patrol. He caught sight of her and weaved his way through the camp towards her. His scent washed over her and she felt an immediate calming effect.

Brambleclaw brushed his cheek against hers in greeting. She purred at his touch. He visited her and the kits in the nursery whenever he could, but his deputy duties kept him very busy. Often times he didn't get around to seeing them until twilight when the clan started settling down for the day.

"I've missed you," Brambleclaw whispered in her ear, his breath warm against it.

Hopeflame licked his cheek. "Me too."

By this time, the kits had run off with Featherstream who was helping them pick pieces from the fresh-kill pile. Thunderkit had joined them and was sharing a vole with Riverkit.

"You've been cooped up in camp all day." Brambleclaw touched his tail to her shoulder. "Do you think Featherstream and Tawnypelt would watch the kits so we can go on a walk?"

Hopeflame brightened at the idea. "I'll go ask them!"

She bounded across camp to where Featherstream was grabbing a fish for Silverkit and Stormkit. Her half-sister didn't need much convincing and Hopeflame was soon returning to Brambleclaw's side. "Let's go."

Without another word, Brambleclaw and Hopeflame raced from camp side by side. They didn't say a word, just ran through the forest without a care in the world. The snow kicked up behind them

and a breeze wove through the trees. Hopeflame picked up prey scents and itched to stop and hunt. Maybe another time.

"Race you to Sunningrocks!" Brambleclaw yowled.

Hopeflame picked up the pace and veered in the direction of Sunningrocks. She was right on his tail. Brambleclaw swerved to avoid a thicket of snow-covered brush. Hopeflame had to slow down to avoid it, her reflexes a little slow.

She sped up in an attempt to close the gap between her and Brambleclaw. The trees thinned up ahead and she caught a glimpse of Sunningrocks. Within a few heartbeats, she emerged from the tree-line and trotted the rest of the way. Her breathing was a little labored from the run.

"Are you alright?" He brushed his muzzle against hers.

Hopeflame wheezed. "Just a little out of shape."

Brambleclaw beckoned her to follow him and they laid side by side on the Sunningrocks. Despite the descending sun, the rocks still offered her a bit of warmth. She leaned into Brambleclaw and closed her eyes.

"Soon our kits will be apprenticed and you'll return to warrior duties." Brambleclaw reminded her gently. "You'll feel strong again in no time."

Hopeflame felt grateful to Brambleclaw once again. He somehow always knew what to say to ease her worries. They stayed like that until the sun dipped below the horizon. Then they walked back to camp with their fur brushing.

Chapter 16

Twilight fell over the forest, the shadows twining through the trees like tendrils of ivy. They chased away the last remnants of daylight. A soft glow settled over camp as warriors returned from hunts or patrols. They settled down with their mates, their friends, or their family to eat a meal or share tongues.

Brambleclaw returned with his hunting patrol carrying a rabbit and a thrush. On his tail were Breezetail, Thornclaw, Pinepaw, and Smokepaw. They each carried prey to add to the fresh-kill pile. Hopeflame watched them as she sat beside Sandstorm and Mapleheart. The kits played nearby.

"I can smell new-leaf on the wind," Sandstorm sighed with a wistful look in her green eyes. "It'll be nice to get rid of all this snow."

Mapleheart nodded in agreement. "We've been battling a bout of whitecough. So far Webfoot, Brindleface, and Beepaw have it." Her expression turned somber. "I'm most worried about the kits if any of them were to get it."

"Well, mine are nearly three moons old." Hopeflame said but her tail twitched nervously all the same. "Tawnypelt's kits would be most at risk."

"I'll have to check on them before turning in for the night." Mapleheart glanced towards the nursery. "Maybe I'll do that now." She dipped her head to them before ambling off.

Sandstorm stood up and stretched. "I'll leave you two alone."

Hopeflame hadn't even noticed Brambleclaw approaching. Her eyes lit up as he approached with the rabbit he caught. He greeted with a purr and set the rabbit down. Their kits raced over excitedly.

"Is that for us?" Riverkit asked. "I'm *starving*!"

"You are not!" Thunderkit argued, narrowing his amber eyes. "You're being dramatic."

"You're both being dramatic." Windkit purred as she sat patiently.

Brambleclaw's shoulders shook as he laughed from amusement. "Yes, the rabbit's for all of us, so be mindful."

Shadowkit didn't need to be told twice. He and the other kits eagerly tucked into the meal. Hopeflame watched the four of them with such love in her heart. They were growing up so fast. She felt like they'd only been born yesterday.

"I'm going to fetch us that thrush," Brambleclaw decided out loud. "I forget how much their appetite has grown." He wandered over to the fresh-kill pile, leaving her alone with the kits.

Hopeflame kept an eye on the kits while she took in the camp activity. Freeleap shared a mouse with Hollytail, and she wondered if they'd become mates. The apprentices lounged outside the den, no doubt gossiping like starlings. Tornear picked through the fresh-kill pile before choosing a lark. All seemed well.

Brambleclaw returned with the thrush and they crouched down to share the meal. Their kits had devoured the rabbit and were now playing with Stormkit and Silverkit. They would be made apprentices soon, Hopeflame realized.

Sudden snarling pulled Hopeflame's attention to Tigerstar. The large tabby tom lashed his tail furiously and his eyes were alight with anger. "Clan meeting! Now!" He yowled.

Quickly, the clan gathered beneath the Great Rock where Tigerstar took his place upon his throne. Hopeflame sent her kits to the nursery for whatever was about to transpire. She'd seen Tigerstar's outbursts and knew that nothing good came from them. Then, she sat with Owlgaze and Ferncloud.

Tigerstar paced atop the Great Rock. Something really must've unsettled him. These days, it didn't take much. He paused to survey the clan with his amber eyes that always reminded her of

Brambleclaw's. Except Tigerstar's eyes were always cold and unfeeling.

"Someone in TigerClan tried to poison me."

Shocked whispers spread throughout the clan. Hopeflame's fur stood on end. She didn't fear for Tigerstar's life, but the idea of a warrior carrying out such a fox-hearted move was worrying. If they tried to kill Tigerstar, who else would they kill?

"Imagine my surprise when I found deathberries stuffed inside the chest of the lark I was about to eat." Tigerstar's lip curled in disgust. "Some cat put them there and left the lark in my den. I need to know who."

Fear sent shivers down Hopeflame's spine. A lark? Her green gaze found Tornear sitting beside Mosspelt and Runningwind. She'd seen him carrying away a lark from the fresh-kill pile. Larks were not a common prey. Had he tried to poison Tigerstar?

Her claws flexed nervously. Once already she'd defended Tigerstar's life for Brambleclaw's sake. She wasn't too sure she could do it again. So what if Tornear had tried to poison him? He had every right!

Ravenflight stood up to address Tigerstar. Hopeflame begged him internally to keep his maw shut. "I saw Tornear taking a lark from the pile."

Ferncloud leaned over to whisper in Hopeflame's ear. "I hope Tigerstar doesn't kill him!"

Hopeflame murmured in agreement.

Tigerstar pounced down to stand in front of the former WindClan warrior. He raised himself to his full height and towered over him. "I am only going to ask this once, Tornear." Tigerstar's voice dripped with malice. "Did you stash the deathberries in the lark in the hope that I'd eat them and die?"

The tabby tom raised his chin defiantly. His body remained still without any sign of fear. He spoke his response loud and clear:

"Yes."

Before anyone could react, Tigerstar cut Tornear's throat with his claws. Cries filled Fourtrees and Mudclaw raced forward to his side. The former WindClan warrior was Tornear's brother.

"He had every right!"

Eyes turned to glimpse whoever may be so stupid to speak out against Tigerstar. Stepping from the crowd was Eagleswoop, Tallstar's son. The young tabby and white warrior's face contorted with such rage. Hopeflame held her breath.

Eagleswoop continued his rampage. "You killed Ebonypaw! You killed Whitestorm for speaking out against it! You're a *monster*!"

Tigerstar marched over to Eagleswoop. Tawnyfur, Tallstar's mate, called out to Tigerstar and begged him to spare her son. In the blink of an eye, Tigerstar had Eagleswoop pinned beneath his thorn-sharp claws. Pricks of blood surfaced to his fur.

"No! Please!" Tawnyfur sobbed as Breezetail and Tallpoppy held her back.

Within seconds, Eagleswoop lay gutted in the camp clearing like a mutilated piece of prey. His entrails spilled out among the blood. Hopeflame didn't think that she could hate Tigerstar anymore than she already did. Clearly, she was wrong.

Tigerstar lifted his blood-stained muzzle to address the clan. "Anyone else care to defy me?"

No one moved or breathed a word.

"Dawncloud, Whitethroat, Sandstorm, and Ashfang, take their bodies to the moor. Place them next to Whitestorm's carcass."